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THE MAN IN POSSESSION.

CHAPTER I.

AN UNPLEASANT SURPRISE.

THE Irish mail train was just due at Euston Station.

It wanted a week of Christmas and the weather was as disagreeable and dispiriting as it well could be, and generally *is* now, in our genial foggy delightful island. There are legends respecting Christmas weather handed down to us by our great grandparents —legends as to brilliant skies and sparkling frosts and healthy invigorating air that sent the blood tingling in the veins of youth, and brought roses to young cheeks and light to bright eyes—legends of sunlight sparkling on bough and twig, which the Frost King had decorated for his Carnival-legends of scarlet hollyberries, and glistening evergreens, and general hilarity and enjoyment. We have heard of these things and seen pictures of them, and done our best to give an artistic sense of the season in our Christmas cards and magazine covers, but we are inclined to doubt these legends, and to believe that Christmas weather could never have been anything but that mix-

ture of fog, rain, darkness and dreariness that we have known in our own generation.

The present approach of the festive season had been heralded by thick fog and biting winds. The big dreary station looked even more dreary than usual as the damp mists clung to it with zealous fervour, and the cold bitter wind blew in fierce gusts from one end of the platform to the other.

Only a few people were waiting there, besides the usual assemblage of guards and porters. The train was very late, and the cold and unhappy-looking mortals might just as well have remained in the waiting-room by the large roaring fire, seeing that by no possible means could their dreary tramp up and down the platform expedite the tardy train. However, they seemed to think that an incessant watch for the signal and an incessant questioning of the blandly ignorant porters was incumbent upon them.

Only two people, both young, yet with a philosophic acceptance of the situation that put many of heir elders to shame—only two people, a young man and a young woman—remained in the waiting-room —one on either side of the fire.

The young woman—for that term describes her better than the word "girl"—was apparently about twenty years of age. She had a singularly beautiful face, with wonderful eyes, dark grey, black-lashed and full of expression. Her hair, which was of the loveliest richest brown, taking a ruddy glow from the dancing fire-flames was coiled in wonderful luxuriance under her small velvet toque. She had thrown open

her long fur-lined cloak of Gobelin blue cloth, and her graceful figure in its well-fitting dark tweed dress looked quite in harmony with her surroundings. The woman who contrives to be dressed in such harmony is always well dressed, at least to male eyes, and we may suppose they have some right to be judges.

The young man was—perhaps like many other young men—not bad-looking and not very strikingly handsome, rather tall, very well dressed, and decidedly a gentleman. For fifteen minutes they had sat opposite each other with the conventional English propriety that demands no unintroduced persons of opposite sex shall on any plea or account whatever address a word to one another. I believe there are exceptional circumstances, such as a railway accident or a fire, under which Mrs. Grundy does permit the verbal exchange of sentiments or sensations, but even then the acquaintance must proceed no further than the duration of the accident requires. It is not to be considered precedent for acquaintance or intimacy, unless satisfactory patents of respectability on both sides can be produced "on demand."

The girl began to grow restless; she almost wished that her companion would not be so aggravatingly calm and composed. She speculated as to who he could be waiting for. A mother, sister, maiden aunt? Something feminine and helpless no doubt.

She might have been surprised had she known that he was speculating in exactly the same manner about herself. "Strong-minded, I'm sure," ran his reflections. "No girl has that steady, fearless look and

firm chin for nothing. Used to managing people, I should say—not half bad to be managed by her. I'm sure she's come to meet some old weak-minded father or pretty helpless sister. I wonder if I dare venture on a remark?"

He drew out his watch and looked at the time. "Nearly half an hour late," he observed, addressing no one in particular but offering the suggestion as a prelude to conversation, should his companion be disposed to accept it.

The girl glanced at him with those eyes he had called "steady and fearless." She did not smile, but said simply—"It must be owing to the fog. I hope there has been no accident."

"Oh, no. I'm sure there hasn't," the young man said cheerfully. He was rather inclined to be cheerful as a rule. His face was bright and expressive of good nature and content—a by no means unenviable nature in a world where circumstances and people are apt to be trying and aggressive. "It is rather—rather tiring work waiting for trains," he resumed, taking courage from the fact of being as yet "unsnubbed." "I think people oughtn't to expect it. Now here I had to get up at five o'clock just because a maiden aunt has chosen to come over from Ireland to spend Christmas with my people."

He said "my people" in an easy, familiar way as if his companion would fully understand their position, worth, and numeric value. She smiled for the first time. "I," she said, "have come to meet my father. He has been over to Cork on business. Do you know Ireland at all?" she added abruptly.

"Yes," he said, "I've been there. I'm blessed with Irish relations, mainly the maiden aunt I've just told you about. She's very rich—she owns a big brewery near Athlone. I wonder," he added eagerly, "if your father knows her."

"Do all Irish people of necessity know each other?" asked the girl, smiling again. There was something so eager and boyish and unconventional about the young fellow that she felt amused if not interested.

"No.—O—of course not," he answered, laughing a little in his turn. "But still it's not improbable. Why," —with renewed excitement, "they might have made acquaintance with one another crossing over."

"Yes," said the girl quietly. "There's nothing very improbable in that."

"Aunt Judy's capital fun," resumed the young man. "She is a sort of character, you know and——"

"Oh! there's the train," exclaimed the girl, springing to her feet and making at once for the door. The young man followed her more slowly.

The station was now a scene of bustle and confusion. Porters rushed about, carriage doors banged; faces young and old, pale, grimed, fatigued, ill-tempered, turned hither and thither in search of friends, or luggage, which was even more important. Voices shouted orders, greetings or inquiries, intermingled with animadversions on the fog, or the bitter blast that swept relentlessly through the station.

Amidst all the noise and confusion the tall young woman in her gobelin blue cloak stood quietly and unexcitedly, her eyes glancing from one carriage to

another, from one hurrying figure to another, until at last she caught sight of the face she knew. Then she moved forward and simply said, "Well, father, so you're back at last."

"Ah! Kate, Kate, my love, how are you? No need to ask, your looks speak for you."

He was a big handsome man, with a fresh-coloured face and laughing eyes. He talked rather loudly and incessantly, but his voice had a certain richness of accent that made it wonderfully pleasant to listen to. It was essentially an Irish voice, with the sonorous utterance of vowels peculiar to Irish voices, and yet with that sonorous fulness unmarred by any brogue.

Amidst a crowd of disjointed words and sentences and of contradictory orders he at last managed to collect his belongings and to stow them and himself into a cab—his daughter quietly following him, after giving the cabman their address.

She had lost sight of the young man who had come to meet his maiden aunt. She wondered if he had found her, and involuntarily glanced at two or three of the passing cabs. But soon he passed out of her memory and she was listening to the half complaining—half-humorous string of remarks and questions that poured from the lips of her companion.

"And has anything new happened at home?" he asked at last.

The girl shrugged her shoulders An expression of disdainful resignation to facts long accepted flashed over her face.

"What is there to happen?" she asked. "Bills,

duns, tax collectors. Did you," turning eagerly to him, "did you get the money you expected."

"Faith and I didn't," he said gloomily, "not a sixpence. The property was put up, but not a bid worth taking came of it. They say t'was a bad time of year to sell."

"It always seems a bad time of year to sell property—in Ireland," said the girl quietly.

"You're right there, Kitty my dear," laughed her father. "It's a bad thing for me and for you, too, that we were ever saddled with that estate. And what are we to do now?" he resumed. "Here I've come back as poor as I went, and a pack of creditors to face into the bargain."

The girl sighed. "I might go on the stage," she said. "You know I *can* act—and it really is getting quite the thing for ladies to do. The new school goes in for drawing-room acting, not melodramatic buffoonery, and Mr. Vanburgh has told me over and over again he will give me £20 a week to play in his own comedy at the 'Boudoir Theatre,' if you will let me. Fancy £20 a week coming in surely and regularly. Why, it would mean, bills paid, taxes settled, decent food without a seasoning of insults and 'requests for payment' in every dish; it would mean——"

"It won't mean anything, as long as I've a voice in the matter! I'm ashamed of you, Kate. You, the daughter of Cornelius O'Brien, with the blood of the best Irish nobility in your veins, to talk of going on the stage, like some milliner's apprentice, or—or barmaid celebrity. And for what? To make money

to pay bills. Bills, faugh ! If they were decent folk at all they'd be only too glad of the honour of serving us, and it's not payment but orders they'd be asking for, until such time as it was perfectly convenient to settle."

"I'm afraid that time would be a long way off, father," said the girl with a sigh. "You see they must live also. And however things are managed in Ireland there still exists a prejudice in favor of the payment of just debts in the breast of the English tradesman. I don't know why it should exist, but undoubtedly it does."

"Yes, more's the pity," said Cornelius O'Brien gloomily. "However," he added after a pause, "there's Christmas close at hand now, and they won't be so heathenish as to bother us for a week or two, and meanwhile something might turn up."

The girl looked at him half sadly, half compassionately. It was so little use to speak, so little use to suggest. He had always been the same ever since she could remember; genial, thoroughly open-hearted extravagant to folly, and negligent almost to the verge of criminality. The burden of debt and difficulty, the incessant shifts and straits and worries, had killed her mother. Sometimes she wondered if they would kill her, or only harden her. Perhaps the latter was the worse fate of the two, considering what possibilities of love and truth and tenderness lay in her nature.

She did not speak for some moments, only the grey eyes continued to look wistfully out at the foggy deserted streets, where the gas lamps still twinkled,

and where a policeman or a street watchman were the only signs of living humanity. She shivered as she drew the warm folds of her cloak about her shapely figure. It was all so dull and dreary and depressing, and she was going back to a life just as gloomy and just as depressing. She was twenty years of age and fair and good and sweet as any maiden could be, or any man desire, and yet, life was all wrong for her—or so she felt it to be, all wrong, and there seemed no hope of its ever getting better or ever being set right.

This is not a pleasant thought for a girl of twenty, or indeed for any age, but youth specially resents troubles and grievances, and is somewhat selfishly inclined to think that the world has been created for its benefit, and to minister to its happiness. Fortunately there are always plenty of opposing and aggravating causes to dispel this illusion, otherwise there really is no knowing what sort of selfish and exacting thing youth might become. As it is, the chastening hand of disappointment is generally lying in wait, to moderate its expectations and subdue its enthusiasms.

To Kate O'Brien it seemed as if she had never possessed either of these blessings. What is the use of expecting a change for the better, when every year shows a steady surplus of "the worse?" and how can any one be enthusiastic over a prospect of unpaid debts, heavy bills, shabby dresses and general discomfort. Early in life it seemed to her that she had been obliged to learn that great lesson called, in feminine parlance "managing." She had to manage her father in his weak and rash moments, which were

many, to manage the housekeeping on almost nothing a year; to manage Biddy, the Irish servant, who had only two special virtues—attachment to the family, and cleanliness; to manage irate tradespeople, who were always wanting money and threatening to stop supplies; to manage her own toilettes, and make, turn and alter dresses and bonnets, and other necessary articles as best she could.

She had not to manage her father's wardrobe, however, as he contrived to do that himself with considerable skill, and some considerable change of tailors.

He always impressed upon her that it was an absolute necessity he should be well dressed, with strict observance of the prevailing "mode" as represented by Piccadilly and the Park. But then he was a member of a fashionable club, and that institution has naturally its little exactions.

And this had been Kate's life. As for her education, that had been picked up anyhow, and anywhere. She had learnt French when they stayed for six months in Brussels. German in similar fashion, during an enforced residence in a small, cheap little town on the Rhine. As for music, that seemed to come naturally to her, and she had needed very little instruction indeed. The dreary technicalities once mastered, the rest was easy.

And now she was twenty years old!

It seemed a very long time to her—very, very long. In all that time she had never been to a ball, never possessed a confidential friend—and never had a lover. Saying this is tantamount to saying she lacked

three essentials to feminine happiness. But she seemed none the worse. Her life was too busily engaged with that noble art of "managing" to leave room for idle hours, or young ladyish fancies. She was not given to gossip or confidences, therefore had not formed any strong friendships. For a girl scorns another girl who has absolutely nothing to confide to her—no romantic hopes, no stolen meetings with some special "somebody" who may be Lovelace or Lothario, but is invested with the halo of sentiment in the feminine mind, because he whispered soft nothings, or danced six out of twelve round dances with her at her "first ball." But Kate had had no such experiences, and had met no Romeos or Lotharios yet. She ought to have been very thankful for that, had she only known how few of them are worth meeting, or caring about.

The unknown, however, is always invested with a spurious charm. Perhaps she had dreams of her own respecting one who should be hero, lover, friend—all that impossible combination, which, in their ignorance of mankind, girls will attribute to these demi-gods of idealisation.

But at the present moment, she was not dreaming of anything romantic. Only feeling cold and weary and dispirited as the cab jogged and jolted along the deserted thoroughfare of Piccadilly, finally landing them at a dingy house in a dingy street, which was only fashionable because of a third or fourth cousinship to the neighbourhood of Eaton Square.

The house was small and dark, and had been built by an architect with a singular knowledge of discom-

fort. But Cornelius O'Brien had pronounced it "just the thing," and as it was within walking distance of his club, he had at once taken a lease of it without reference to Kate's taste or opinions.

At the door of this domicile they were accordingly deposited, in the thick grey fog of the December morning, and the cabman grumblingly began to unload the vehicle of its accumulation of hat-boxes, Gladstone bags, and other manly *impedimenta.*

Kate had rung the bell and the door was opened by a somewhat untidy looking domestic with very black hair and very red cheeks.

In the narrow passage stood, or rather slouched, a shabby, seedy-looking man with an air of general indifference, and "do-nothingness" about him. As Kate's eye fell upon him, she started and glanced at Biddy.

"Thrue for you, Miss," said that personage. "They're in. Ah, the mane blayguard! A nice trick to play on a gintleman, as I told them."

"What is it?" asked Kate, rather faintly.

"Queen's taxes, mum," said the man, apologetically. "Quarter overdue. Notice given. Put in to-day."

"And I claning the steps, and as unsuspecting as the babe unborn," exclaimed Biddy.

"Dear me, what's all this?" said O'Brien, advancing.

He did not repeat the question. He was not quite ignorant of the aspect and general significance of the type of man before him.

"Very sorry, sir. Can't be helped," was the

rejoinder, as the individual removed his greasy hat and began to wipe it apologetically with his greasy sleeve. "Only put in temporary, you know, sir. Notice was served. Taxes not paid. Easily settled."

"Easily," muttered O'Brien, with rising wrath. "By Jove, I wish it was."

"What's to be done?" asked Kate.

"Oh, don't you trouble yourself, mum, I'm used to ladies. You won't know I'm here. I'll just step into the kitchen, and as long as I've my pipe and my bit of vittals, why, no one could be quieter or more peaceable than Bill Fletcher."

"It's dreadful," said Kate despairingly.

Her father took some loose silver from his pocket, and tossed it to the cabman, who drove away, leaving the luggage piled in the hall.

"Now, my man," said O'Brien, cheerfully, "I suppose since you *are* here, you'll have to stay. It's quite impossible that I can meet your demands just at this moment. Most inconsiderate to place one in such a fix. They call this a free country, and a man finds his house taken possession of in this fashion the moment he turns his back. Hanged if I'll support the government any more. Now, lend a hand, and get these bags and things upstairs."

"Certainly, sir, always ready to oblige."

He shouldered the bag, and made his way upstairs. Biddy followed, calling out directions. Kate looked at her father in dismay.

"Can't you pay him off?" she said.

"My present amount of capital is in the pocket of that departing Jehu," said O'Brien, laughing. "Be-

sides, if these people have the exceeding bad taste to intrude upon my domestic privacy in this fashion they deserve to wait; and wait they must. Don't look so put out, my dear. These little accidents will happen, and I believe bailiffs are very decent fellows. They stop in the basement with the beetles and the cook; and as long as they get their beer and tobacco they're all right. We have an unexpected guest for Christmas, that's all."

The girl said no more; only set her white lips together while her face grew very stern and cold.

"Oh! I am so sick of it all," she said to herself as she went slowly up the dark and narrow staircase. "The shifts, and lies, and shams; the endless humiliations. Year after year it only gets worse. God help us—when will it end!—When will it end!"

CHAPTER II.

THE SUBSTITUTE.

"WHAT am I to do with him at all, Miss Kate?" asked Biddy ruefully, as she met her young mistress upstairs.

"I don't know, Biddy," said the girl. "I suppose he'll stay till the money's paid. I really can't say what the law is. It's a matter of £20, I believe, and we havn't got five even to tide us over Christmas."

"Shure 'tis a shame at this time o' year when it's paice and goodwill that is mint to be in ivery blessed household—and a dirty ould vagabond like that setting himself down in my kitchen; and 'tis expecting vittals and beer he 'll be, not to mention bed and lodgings. Ah, the saints presarve us, Miss Kate, but it's your father, now, is the foolish man! What could he be laving his taxes unpaid for? Shure 'tis aisy enough to manage butcher and baker and sich-like, but the Quane—(God rest her sowl) she's mighty particlar that she gets *her* income all right and safe, and so I've been telling the masther, iver since this house was took. Talk of locality! Shure locality is all very well, but when you've to pay rint

and taxes to live in it, 'tis the chape neighbourhood I'd be for choosing."

She threw down the rugs and parcels with which she was laden.

A bright fire burnt in the grate. The bedroom looked cheerful, and was furnished with that due regard to comfort, almost indeed to luxury, which Cornelius O'Brien deemed only right and fitting for an Irish gentleman. A small table by the fire was covered with a white cloth, on which stood a silver coffee service. The bed, with its snowy linen and satin eider-down coverlet, looked very inviting.

It was a strange fact that, hampered as he was, by debts, duns and difficulties, Cornelius O'Brien always insisted that his own personal surroundings should be comfortable, and his own personal wants attended to. He had early impressed Kate and Biddy with this necessity, and they had managed to conform to it with more or less difficulty through all the shifts and straits that they had known.

If ever an individual possessed a guileless inaptitude for the management of worldly affairs that individual was Cornelius O'Brien, but he was not so guileless or ignorant that he did not know how to take very good care of his own comforts, and to administer to them with a supreme disdain of the inconvenience he afforded to any one else.

As he came into the bedroom now and threw off his travelling wraps, he glanced round with supreme content at the various arrangements.

"That's right, Biddy," he said approvingly. "A good fire and a cup of coffee. Nothing like it

after a journey. Such a journey too! Ugh," and he shivered at the recollection. "Devil a soul on board that wasn't ill, barring myself."

He poured out a cup of coffee as he spoke, adding sugar and frothing up the boiling milk with an epicurean delight in every detail.

"Well, Biddy—and I hope you and Miss Kate have taken care of yourselves," he went on, as he sipped the fragrant beverage contentedly. "Let me see—one, two, nearly three months, isn't it, I've been away — three months. How time flies among one's old friends and associates! It's been very enjoyable, Kate, my dear—very. Every one so delighted to see me back in the old country again."

"No doubt," said Kate somewhat gloomily, "only your visit doesn't seem to have had any results beyond that mutual delight. You told me you were going over strictly on business, and that you would return able to discharge all our debts."

"Shure, thin, I hope you'll begin by discharging that haythen blayguard in the kitchen," exclaimed Biddy. "It's meself that'll be glad to see the back o' him, I can tell ye, sir."

O'Brien looked somewhat rueful at this reminder of his uninvited guest.

"You must put up with him for a day or two, Biddy," he said soothingly. "I—I really forget what sort of beings bailiffs are, but I've always heard they're very inoffensive. Indeed, sometimes they've become quite useful adjuncts to a household, and waited at table for a dinner party, cleaned boots and windows, and one—ahem!—friend of mine told me

that he had known an individual who played the fiddle a whole evening for a children's party that was going on. Not that we're likely to put our—friend—to any such use; still, they're not such terrible creatures after all."

"No more's an alleygaytor, or a haythen Chinee," said Biddy with fine contempt. "But you've got to get used to them before you find it out. But I'd better be going downstairs now to the gentleman who's kapin' company with the black beetles."

"Perhaps he'll be 'kapin' company' with you, Biddy, before we're done with him," laughed Cornelius O'Brien. "It's never too late for a sweetheart, and you're getting on in years now, you know."

"Ah! and is it me you mane—making a fool of meself for any crature with two legs and trousers on 'em. By the powers 'tisn't Biddy Callaghan would be after doing the likes o' that;" and she whisked herself off with great indignation, leaving Kate and her father to discuss the question of the new inmate at their leisure.

The "day or two" so airily spoken of by Cornelius O'Brien passed on, and another and another followed, but, as yet, the wherewithal to discharge the bailiff and the debt was not forthcoming.

Meanwhile the man settled down in a subdued and inoffensive manner that even Biddy could not find fault with. He was cheerful and obliging, always ready to lend a hand at anything that came in his way. He was an individual of resource, and could be put to many uses, as Biddy speedily discovered.

He would scrub her kitchen, white-wash ceilings, light fires, clean windows and boots with equal skill. and even declared himself an excellent "plain" cook, This statement, however, Biddy received with lofty and incredulous scorn, nor would she be induced to allow him to try his hand at any culinary preparations with the exception of making toast and tea for his own consumption.

Fog and gloom still shrouded the city. The shopkeepers grew almost desperate as their attempts to deck their windows in Christmas array were thwarted by the blinding mist and darkness without. No one cared to perambulate the streets save on errands of a compulsory nature, and shopping was reduced to a hurried duty instead of a desultory or delightful amusement.

"Who could feel festive or happy?" thought Kate O'Brien, looking out with wistful eyes from the misty windows of the little drawing-room.

The road opposite was a mass of black mud and melted sleet. The fog clung like a filmy chilling shroud to the wet railings, and the dark housetops, and the gaunt, spectral lamp-posts. All was gloomy and wretched and depressing. Upstairs her father lay ill. He had caught cold in crossing from Ireland, and now was threatened with an attack of bronchitis. The doctor had forbidden him to leave his bed, and the additional trouble and expense of illness now threatened the household. She leant her aching head against the window frame and sighed. A sense of melancholy and despair oppressed her. The bravest heart will sometimes give way, and the girl felt to-

day as if endeavour were strained almost to breaking point.

The door opened suddenly, and Biddy appeared in walking attire and with a market basket on her arm. "Maybe you've forgotten 'tis Christmas Eve," she said abruptly. "And mighty inconvanient too, falling on a Friday, and we with scarce anything to ate, and three days to purvide for. Might ye have a shilling or two handy, Miss Kate?"

The girl roused herself with an effort, and drew a worn and shabby purse from the pocket of her dress. As she opened it her face grew even more hopeless.

"Nothing but a sixpence, Biddy," she said wearily. "What's the use of that?"

"Sixpence is it?" echoed the faithful Abigail. "Shure, Miss Kate, the ways o' Providence are mighty strange. Here we are living in an illigant neighbourhood; isn't there a 'Baronet' next door, and an 'Honourable' jist over the way—and Mr. O'Brien shure, he's got one of the grand estates in the south of Ireland and yet——"

She looked significantly at the coin in the girl's bare palm.

"If you won't be offended, Miss Kate, now, there's a matter of a brooch or a ring in your jules-case upstairs that's not wanted for a month or two," she suggested with diffidence.

The girl sighed. "My mother's jewellery," she said plaintively, "it's—it's rather hard, Biddy, to sell that."

"Shure it's not selling it at all I'll be, Miss Kate, only just taking a loan of it, for a month or so.

And shure, honey, if it's your poor mother's jules 'tis your poor father's intarior that's got to be filled; and with all the will in the world, Miss Kate dear, I can't be making beef-tea and jellies out of black-beetles."

Kate laughed in spite of herself. "You know where the case is, Biddy," she said. "Take what you like. There isn't much now."

Biddy came back in a moment, her face radiant with hopefulness and the excitement attending her proposed errand,

"Now kape up your heart, Miss Kate," she said cheerfully. "It's not long I'll be—and your papa—shure he's slaping like a blessed infant. I've left hot wather, and the beef-tay is simmering by the kitchen fire and the man watching it. Good-bye, honey."

"Good-bye, Biddy," said the girl listlessly, as she moved away from the window and took a chair by the fire.

Biddy had not left the house five minutes before a knock came at the front door. Kate rose and was just about running downstairs to answer it, when she heard the kitchen door open and the sound of shuffling steps in the hall.

"I suppose Fletcher is going to the door," she thought and glanced over the bannisters.

She heard a sound of voices, but thinking it was only the usual "call" for settlement of an account, she returned to the drawing-room again.

The striking of the clock at last roused her from her somewhat gloomy thoughts. She glanced up. "Eight o'clock. I had better go down to the kitchen

for the beef-tea," she said to herself. "Father is sure to want it when he wakes."

She ran lightly down the stairs and opened the kitchen door. She was so used to see the bailiff there sitting in the corner by the stove, or at work in the adjoining scullery, that when she caught sight of a man's figure in a heavy brown ulster, and with a soft felt hat half covering his face, she gave no thought to it being another figure or another face.

The dim light of an oil lamp alone lit up the kitchen. The fire had been "banked up" by Biddy with a due regard for economy, and the saucepan containing the beef-tea stood on one side.

"I've come for my father's soup, Fletcher," she said, advancing to the stove. "Why"— and she came to an abrupt stop and stood staring at the man, who rose from the chair—"why, you're not Fletcher. Where's he gone?"

"No," stammered the young man, hastily removing his hat, and by so doing dragging a heavy fringe of fair curling hair over his forehead. "No, I'm not Fletcher. I—I came to fetch him for an accident. I mean his daughter had an accident while she was at work—upset a lamp and set herself on fire. They took her to an hospital, and I came to tell him. Of course, he explained he couldn't leave here without —well, without a substitute, so——"

"So you offered to be the substitute. Very kind of you," said the girl, somewhat haughtily.

She could not see the face of the "substitute" very clearly, but the voice was refined, and his general

appearance betokened a somewhat higher grade of life than that occupied by Fletcher.

"I suppose all bailiffs are not old," she thought, as she abruptly turned away and bent over the saucepan to examine its contents.

A soup-cup stood on the table, beside it a small tray covered with a white napkin. The girl lifted the saucepan, and was about to pour its contents into the cup.

The new bailiff, actuated by motives of chivalry, advanced eagerly.

"Pray let me do that," he said, taking the saucepan from her hands.

She smiled a little.

"Thank you," she said, "it is rather hot. My servant has gone out marketing. I expect her back directly. Is there—will you—I mean if there is anything you require will you just ask her for it? She has got quite used to having Fletcher here."

"And I can promise to give no more trouble than Fletcher," said the new bailiff, while the colour rose warmly and suddenly to his face.

He was thinking in his heart, "She does not remember. I'm glad of that. By Jove! what an odd thing that it should have been to her house I came. Her house! Poor girl, how worn and weary she looks, and what a Christmas prospect. A sick father —a load of debt—a man in possession."

CHAPTER III.

THE CHRISTMAS PUDDING.

KATE felt somewhat puzzled as she thought of that young man in the kitchen. Surely he was too superior, too refined, for such a life, and what was there about him that reminded her of some one she had met before. She could not recollect—but after all what did it matter, she thought. No doubt he would go in an hour or two, when Fletcher returned.

She gave her father his beef-tea. He seemed drowsy, and settled himself to sleep again as soon as he had drunk off the contents of the cup. The girl lowered the lamp, and placing the bell close beside the invalid she went downstairs again.

She felt sadly lonely and in need of companionship to-night. What a long time Biddy seemed to be!

"If Fletcher had been here I could have gone down and had a chat with him," she thought.

The fire was nearly out. She did not attempt to rekindle it. The room looked chill and dreary, and the ticking of the clock sounded horribly loud in the stillness. Oh, would Biddy never come, or Fletcher!

She moved restlessly about. "I think I'll go

downstairs again," she said to herself, "even a bailiff is better than no one to talk to."

Kate was not an atom conventional. Perhaps one result of her strange bringing up was her utter fearlessness and frankness. She did things and said things that a modern young lady would not have done or said. Besides, she felt strangely curious about this young man. Surely his voice, his manner, his mode of speaking were not the voice and manners of a common man—say Fletcher for instance. Certainly she had heard of strange accidents and misfortunes that drive men and women also to do strange things for a livelihood, but what misfortune could have driven this, "superior young man" to be a bailiff? But was he a bailiff? Had he not said he only obliged Fletcher by staying here for an hour or two?

The more she thought of it the more puzzled she became.

"I really think I will go down and talk to him," she said again as the fire sank into grey ashes and the loneliness and gloom seemed almost unbearable.

She went downstairs to the kitchen. The young man still sat by the fire, his ulster collar drawn up round his face, that face half-covered by the fair curling hair that he had purposely disarranged.

"I cannot understand why my servant has not returned," said Kate as she entered, "and Fletcher too. How long did he say he would be away?"

"An hour or two," answered the young man rising from his seat. "Can I be of any use to you," he went on eagerly. "I mean is there anything you want done? Please don't mind asking me. I

should think it an honour, a pleasure. I should indeed!"

Certainly a very strange young man—for a bailiff.

Kate looked at him steadily.

Again that haunting memory crossed her, but she could not remember how or where she had seen him before. "Well," she said at last, "I believe there has been an attempt at a Christmas pudding, and I promised Biddy to mix it. It is rather late to set about such an important matter; most people make their puddings a week or two before Christmas, but this——" she looked round, then went over to a cupboard and brought out a large earthenware basin filled with many strange and unwholesome looking things. "This," she resumed, pointing to the basin with a wooden spoon, "is only a feeble attempt, on Biddy's part, to keep up with the spirit of the season."

The young man approached and looked eagerly into the basin.

"Is that how a plum-pudding looks before it's mixed," he said.

"Have you never seen one in this stage of existence before?" laughed Kate. Her spirits were rising. She no longer felt the gloom and depression of the drawing-room weighing her down.

"No, never," said the young man.

The girl looked suddenly at him with her frank grey eyes.

"Do you like being a bailiff?" she asked.

A smile of unconcealed amusement flickered over his face. "Very much," he said, "under some circumstances. But you see I've not been very long

at the—the business. I dare say I shall find out its drawbacks as well as its advantages in time."

"You don't speak like one, at least like Fletcher," said the girl, as she laid down the spoon and went over to the cupboard for the flour and milk and eggs.

"Oh," said the young man mendaciously, "that's because I'm better educated than Fletcher. I was always fond of books and reading you see, Miss—— and——"

Kate looked sharply at him. That "Miss" sounded so odd from his lips.

"Do you know," she said, "I have an idea I've seen you before, somewhere; I can't remember where."

"Perhaps," said the young man, "you've seen me going to—work."

"To work," echoed Kate, more and more puzzled. "Do bailiffs work?"

"I'm a sort of—of carpenter and cabinet-maker," he said, still with that odd look of amusement in his eyes as of one who secretly enjoys an excellent joke. "I take up Fletcher's business as an amusement when off work."

"Oh," said Kate, "a carpenter."

She felt a little disappointed, yet after all what was it to her if the noble art of turning and cabinet-making claimed this goodly youth as a "'prentice hand," or if he chose to employ his leisure hours in the lucrative and amusing profession of which Fletcher was an honoured member.

"But how can he be so different?—truly education is a very wonderful thing," she reflected, as she

measured spice, and weighed flour and sugar, and mixed them all into the mysterious compound in the basin.

"Do let me help you. I'll beat up the eggs," said the young man.

The girl nodded assent, and watched his deft and well-shaped hands as they adjusted themselves to that part of the business.

"Not a bit like a workman's hands," she thought. "I wonder if really he is what he says."

The young man kept up a running fire of talk. He was wonderfully well informed and amusing. But he always kept his face in the shade and always contrived that his fair curly hair should tumble over his forehead, or into his eyes, so that it was difficult to form a correct idea of what he was like.

"I didn't know young ladies could cook," he said admiringly, as he watched the girl's skilful manipulation of ingredients.

"What do you suppose they do?" she asked curiously.

She thought it would be interesting to know what carpenters imagined as to the occupation and benefit in life of young people of her sex and position.

"Well, I suppose they play the piano, and read a great deal, and do needlework sometimes, and dress and look beautiful—and——"

The girl laughed merrily.

"Oh, yes, they do all those things, but can't you imagine they might be useful also. I certainly can play the piano, and I'm very fond of reading, and I make my own dresses, too, but I should be sorry if

I couldn't cook a dinner, or at least know how one should be cooked, and make my father's beef-tea and jellies. Have you any sisters?" she asked abruptly.

"Sisters—no-o," stammered the young man, "only a cousin who lives in the house and does what is called 'art furnishing.' She makes all kinds of things, and I do the woodwork for her."

"Well, can't she cook and see after a house as well as do 'art furnishing'?"

"Oh," said the young man laughing, "I suppose she can, but I've never seen her do it."

"I sometimes think," said the girl, as she took the frothing eggs from his hand and added them to the compound in her basin, "that the workers have the best of life. It is dreadful to be aimless and hopeless, and see day after day slipping by—nothing done—and nothing to do."

"Young ladies," observed the carpenter as he cut up some lemons and handed them to her, "are not expected to work."

"I wish I could do something," continued the girl, speaking half to herself. "I want to go on the stage, but my father won't let me; he thinks ladies and gentlemen should never do any work."

She laughed contemptuously. "Ladies and gentlemen! If I had my way every one should work at something useful or ennobling. We have only one life. How different the world would be now if all who have lived in it had made that life of real use while they had it. If artists had worked for art and been appreciated as they deserved; if great writers

had met with the reward of merit, and great musicians been free to write their music as it was in them to write it, instead of frittering away time and genius in the effort for 'popularity'; if statesmen had been as honest as they were zealous in a nation's cause, with no party feeling in the background and no selfish personal advantage offered as the price of their services; if nations had ceased to covet other territories, and crowned heads settled their own disputes instead of wasting innocent lives and desolating homes by the false cry of 'glory and patriotism'; if—— Oh, but there is no end to it when one once begins to think. And there is no class, no grade, to whom the same rule would not apply. Think of yourself," she went on eagerly, dropping her spoon and forgetting all about the pudding in her enthusiasm, "even you might make carpentering and cabinet-making into an art—something beautiful and refined, and spend your leisure hours in study, improvement, and invention instead of——"

She came to an abrupt pause and blushed as she caught sight of the young man's admiring eyes.

"Instead of—pray go on," he said. "I hope you are not going to suggest public-houses or tea-gardens. I assure you I do not frequent those haunts of delirious bliss. I may plead guilty to a music hall."

Her pretty lips curled scornfully. "They are low," she said with assured conviction as of one who knew. "I am surprised you should like them."

Now why should she be surprised, and why should she suppose this young carpenter was superior to any other young carpenter or artisan for whom

the music hall is supposed to possess special attractions, as not taxing their powers of understanding by the amusement provided, and affording perpetual opportunity for refreshment during the process of such amusement.

"I did not say I liked them," the young man said meekly; "as a matter of fact I don't. They are vulgar; they are really not amusing; and the entertainment they offer always seems to me an insult to anything like refinement or cultivated tastes."

Strange ideas for a carpenter! The girl was startled into silence and wonder again for a few moments. She went on stirring the pudding, and the young man watched her in respectful silence.

"What can be keeping Biddy?" she exclaimed at last, as she glanced at the clock. "It will soon be midnight. I hope nothing has happened to her."

The young man cheerfully declared that nothing could have happened, but the girl was growing very uneasy as time went on.

The pudding was finished at last and emptied into a mould and tied up ready for boiling. Nothing more remained to be done now. Kate wondered whether she should offer supper to this singular individual.

"I am going to see if my father is awake," she said at last. "Perhaps you will come up in the dining-room. Surely Fletcher will be back soon. I'm afraid," she added ruefully, "I can't offer you much in the way of refreshment, as my servant has not returned and Fletcher always fetched his own beer."

He laughed. "I do not drink beer," he said, "so I am saved the trouble of fetching it. I am only sorry

that you are worrying about Biddy's absence. Is she given to staying out in this fashion?"

"No; and that's what makes me so uneasy," said the girl, with another glance at the clock. "Ah! that's my father's bell. I must go. Please stay in the dining-room if you prefer it," she added.

He took up his hat and followed her. "Truly," he thought, "this is an odd way of spending Christmas Eve."

CHAPTER IV.

BEHIND THE SCENES.

THE clocks were striking midnight when Biddy returned, escorted by Fletcher, and—sad to say—in a condition that rendered such escort very necessary.

She had met with some compatriots who had beguiled her into having "a glass" in honour of the season, and the "glass" had led on to another and another until Biddy's tongue grew mildly loquacious, and Biddy's legs spoke in unmistakable language of loss of equilibrium.

In this sore strait she had fortunately come upon the useful and ever obliging Fletcher, and was by him piloted over muddy crossings and past inconvenient lamp-posts, and—still clinging faithfully to her market basket—at last down the area steps and landed in her own kitchen.

The "assistant" bailiff, hearing the noise of feet and voices, went down to those lower regions, and was greeted by Biddy with great dignity and solemnity.

Fletcher apologised for his long delay, and expressed great gratitude for the service the young man had rendered him. His daughter was very much in-

jured, and he seemed greatly concerned about her. The young man was wonderfully interested in the matter. It was an odd thing that he should draw Fletcher aside and hold a long and earnest colloquy with him —emphasised by the chink of coin that seemed by no means unwelcome to the elder official.

Perhaps had Biddy's mind been less preoccupied with domestic and personal matters, she would have wondered why the young man should be so eagerly offering his services again for the next evening should Fletcher wish to go to the hospital. Perhaps, too, she might have thought it somewhat singular that the "substitute" should be willing to pay in good sound coin of the realm for his temporary duties.

It was not at all wonderful that Fletcher should accept such an offer. He would have had to pay a substitute if he left the house while supposed to be in charge of it, and here was a young man actually willing and eager to pay *him* for that post. It was certainly an odd freak, but then the life of a bailiff is a constant series of discoveries more or less odd and inconsistent on the part of human nature. Nothing would have surprised Fletcher very much, and he agreed readily to a bargain in which all the advantage lay on his side, and all the inconvenience on the other.

"I'm afraid the young lady will be annoyed at her servant's condition," said the new substitute, as he surveyed that worthy personage, who was sitting, with an air of great dignity, on her chair, gazing at the nearly extinct fire. Now and then she made a

remark, not very lucid, and the subject matter of which dealt with some one of the name of "Pat" who seemed to have done her some deadly injury, and against whom her wrath declared itself in indistinct threats, and wishes for purgatorial inconvenience at some speedy date.

"Oh, I'll manage her," said Fletcher cheerfully, "I'm used to 'em. And as for the young lady, she's a good, plucky one, she is—don't make any mistake about that."

The young man had no intention of making such a mistake, having indeed a rooted belief that Miss Kate was nothing short of perfection. It was a pardonable belief, considering his youth and inexperience but it was leading him to do a very foolish thing.

Finally he took himself off, leaving Fletcher to pacify Biddy, and explain her state and condition to her young mistress, if necessary.

. . . . . .

The invalid woke up fretful and feverish. His cough was troublesome. Nothing was right, and nothing pleased him. Kate had to spend another hour in administering to his wants and soothing his complaints before she was at liberty to throw herself on the couch in the adjoining dressing-room, and take some sorely needed repose.

Fletcher, the thoughtful and ready-of-resource, had by this time piloted Biddy to her own chamber, and extinguished the light, for fear of accidents. He then came to the invalid's door and informed Kate that the house was safely locked up; that Biddy had gone

to bed, and that he would be on the alert if anything was needed during the night.

The girl was so weary and worn out by this time that she readily accepted his explanations. She even forgot to inquire as to the reason of Biddy's delay. She removed her dress and threw a loose wrapper round her, and then lay down on the couch. She was too tired to dream even of strange bailiffs and fair-haired carpenters with delicate hands that seemed strangely unspoilt by work—too tired, fortunately, to remember or be disturbed by the troubles and worries of her life. Too tired to do anything but sleep dreamlessly, deeply, restfully, far into the morning of the Christmas day.

It was far otherwise with that young man, who seemed to have discovered in the official post of bailiff an occupation at once interesting and congenial. He did not sleep at all, though for no self-evident cause or sufficient reason. On the other hand, he smoked unlimited cigarettes, and partook of a brimming goblet of brandy and soda, and sat in the bachelor comfort of dressing-gown and slippers, meditating on the strange freak of fate that had suddenly narrowed all his hopes, desires and dreams into the life and well-being of a girl.

"That it should have been *her* house!—By Jove, it does seem odd!" he said over and over again. "And she didn't remember me—not a bit, and I've never been able to get her out of my head since the day at Euston. How lovely she is, and what a miserable life! How different I'd make it, if——" Then he laughed aloud. "I suppose

I'm a fool, but when a fellow's been hunted by mothers and daughters like I've been, he's apt to be distrustful of 'disinterested' affection. Now she—she wouldn't know who I was at all, and if she did care——"

He broke off abruptly, his face grew warm even at the thought. "Bah! it's impossible. Why should she? She's so superior to me in every way. Besides though I'm so rich, it's all trade, and when the Brewery comes to me, as Aunt Judy declares it will, I shall seem like a walking advertisement of Rivers & Co's Entire. And she's of a good old family, and Irish people are so terribly proud. But oh, Kitty, who wouldn't be proud of you? Why, you're fit to be a queen."

By which it must appear to the enlightened and unenlightened reader that this foolish young man was already very much in love with a girl whom he had only seen twice. It was a not unremarkable result of accidental circumstances. Other young men and young women have fallen into Love's snares as rapidly and imprudently as this heir to the fortunes of a Brewery. But it seemed very remarkable to Tom Rivers, and the more he dwelt upon it, and the more he thought of Kitty, the more hopelessly infatuated he became.

She was like a living picture before him. Her figure with its beautiful curves and easy grace, her eyes so dark and sweet and earnest—her dusky hair, her firm, yet tender lips, her musical voice. All and every charm and grace of which she was quite unconscious and to which he was so keenly alive came vividly back to his memory and completely usurped his

thoughts. "And all that loveliness and youth sacrificed to a selfish old father. Faugh! it's disgusting," he exclaimed, at the end of his meditations. "Well, I'll manage to see her to-morrow, and—by Jove, I wonder if she'd invite me to have some of that wonderful pudding."

He had forgotten, actually, that he was only a bailiff in the eyes of Kate O'Brien. Forgotten that in the character he had chosen to assume he could scarcely expect to be asked to dinner.

How could she tell that he was a young man of fortune and independence, well educated, popular in society, with his own set of chambers in Piccadilly, with a select circle of friends to whom he gave excellent dinners, and with whom he shared the amusements of town, club, and country at stated seasons.

As he reflected upon these matters, he began to ask himself if there was something about him that betokened he was not of aristocratic birth. That he was only a gentleman by right of refined feelings, good education, and much wealth. Certainly the lovely Irish girl had accepted his statement very unsuspiciously.

Did she really think he was a "common man?" He winced as he put the question. In the first place he had much sympathy for that "common" man, labourer, workman, whatever he might be. He had studied his life, and made himself acquainted with his grievances and hardships. He had talked with him, assisted him, agitated for him and with him.

"My great-grandfather was one of you," he would

say frankly; "surely I may claim the right of friendship."

Sometimes he met with suspicion, sometimes with insult; but on the whole his cheery voice and frank good-will won him friends, despite the disadvantage of his wealth. He certainly did his best to make them forget *that* when he went among them, opening reading-rooms, and starting clubs, helping their wives and daughters to get work, and endeavouring to prove to the men themselves that wages produced more comfort if laid out on the home instead of going to swell the gains of the publican. If these pursuits and efforts did not prove him a friend—well, one could only say they were obstinately prejudiced.

The very fact of his taking Fletcher's place on this memorable Christmas Eve was owing to his unfailing good nature. The man's daughter had been injured while at work in his mother's house. Not content with seeing her safely established at the hospital, he started off to find her father at her request.

The situation that arose from these proceedings at first offered him that interest of "novelty" which he loved above all others. It was complicated by the discovery that the girl, whose house he had unwittingly entered, was no other than the beautiful damsel of the railway station, whom he had seen a week previously. His first impulse had been to disguise his own personality, for fear of hurting her feelings. He had soon seen, however, that she was too troubled and too absorbed to bestow any keen observance on him, and that, however vivid a memory she had

been to him, he, on the other hand, had not been recognised by her.

An ordinary young man might have been less delicate, and drawn himself forcibly back to her memory. An ordinary young man, too, might have seen in that episode of the kitchen only an opportunity to flirt, or "chaff," or talk nonsense, but Tom Rivers was not all an ordinary young man. With all his lightheartedness and "want of proper pride," as his mother termed it, there was a good deal of romance in his nature and a great reverence for the ideal woman at whose feet he would one day lay his heart.

The Ideal Woman had never yet looked at him out of the eyes of society belles, or the marriageable young ladies of Mayfair, or the less pretentious but equally zealous fortune-hunters of Bayswater and Bloomsbury. He had met them all, had danced with them, dined with them, "tennised" with them, boated with them, "afternoon-tea'd" with them, and yet came out of the ordeal perfectly heart-whole. Yet here he was in an utterly irrational manner going down on his knees at a moment's notice, before a girl of whom he knew nothing except that she was of Irish descent, and lived in a house bare almost as "Mother Hubbard's" famous cupboard, and with a bailiff on the premises, a drunken servant, and a sick father.

Truly an ideal situation for a heroine of romance!

He laughed softly as he sat there smoking in the solitude of his bachelor chambers. If he could serve her, help her, win her gratitude. No, not

gratitude exactly; he would want more than that. Well, say her love.

But here his meditations grew altogether too blissful and absurd for description. The "bud of love" had indeed sprung up into a wondrous blossom, ready to be gathered and worn on this girl's neart for all her life, did she so choose or desire. But would she? Was she unconventional enough to be wooed in an utterly unconventional method? The hot blood of youth tingled in this young man's veins as he pondered over the scheme in his mind. It was romantic. It certainly was altogether apart from the dreams and hopes of the *fin de siècle* youth, who finds wooing a bore, and prefers to let the girl do it for him, while he sucks his walking-stick and surveys her with tepid admiration.

But Tom Rivers was not tepid, he was, if anything, impetuous, warm-hearted, and full of fine and generous impulses, which had often strayed far from the fields of common sense.

So it was, that having embarked on this somewhat hazardous romance, he resolved to keep it up, and see what would come of it.

Was it quite impossible that a young lady should care for a working man? Did the *man* himself count for less than his clothes, and his represented position?

He could not answer these questions. He thought it would be an interesting experiment to find out.

Discoveries always promise interest. They do not, however, necessarily fulfil that promise.

CHAPTER V.

"THE MASTER'S WAYS."

"ARE you feeling better, father?" asked Kate, as she brought the invalid his cup of tea next morning.

"How is one to feel better in this detestable climate and living in an atmosphere not fit for a dog to breathe," answered Cornelius O'Brien pettishly. "Better?—no, I'll never be better unless I can get off to the Riviera or Madeira, or somewhere. I suppose I might as well wish for the moon."

Kate quite agreed with him. She stood there quiet, and patient, not going through the form of any Christmas greeting. Why should she? Could any wishes on her part alter the dreary prospect of this Christmas time?

Her father drank his tea. His cough was decidedly better, and his breathing easier, though he would not allow it.

"I wonder why Fate uses me so hardly," he said. "I don't wish to incur debts. I'm perfectly willing to pay everybody what I owe them if—if I only had the money. But I can't get the money. No one will give me any, or help me to make it. My tenants won't pay my rent, and no purchaser offers to

take my property off my hands. What am I to do?"

"I don't know," said Kate wearily. "Have you any idea how long that man will remain downstairs?"

"My dear, what an absurd question. Have I any idea? Why, he will remain just as long as I am finding twenty pounds. And even if I paid it to-morrow, there will be some one else cropping up with another claim. People somehow have always claims against me. Extremely ill-bred and unwise of them—if they only knew."

He laughed softly, as if the subject had an amusing side to it.

"There ought to be a law," he said presently, "a law granting to every man a sufficient income for his necessities—such necessities to be regulated according to position. Now look at me—I don't want much. I like a well-fitting coat, a good dinner, a decent house to live in, and the means for indulging my artistic tastes. I have also a keen capacity for social enjoyment. Surely there is no harm in any of these things. Yet here I am swamped in debts, hampered by want of money, and at the mercy of any wretched tradesman, whose ideas soar no higher than a trap of his own to carry himself and family to Hampstead Heath or Epping Forest. He wants me to provide him with the trap—I want him to provide me with my dinners. Surely a dinner is more necessary than a trap. If he would moderate his ambition and use his legs, faith, we'd both benefit by the transaction.

Kate took the tea-cup from him and put it down.

She was used to these logical observations on his part.

"You look pale, Kate," he said presently. "Come, you mustn't lose your good looks, or what will become of that grand marriage we've talked about? You are my one hope, you know."

"Beggars don't usually make grand marriages," said the girl bitterly, "even if they are as much inclined to sacrifice their personal inclinations as I am."

"Oh, nonsense!" said the father lightly. "Beauty can always command its price in the marriage market. Where's the duchess that could hold a candle to you? By the way," he added anxiously, "when was it we arranged to go to Lady Jocelyn's—at Croft?"

"After New Year," said Kate gloomily. "But we can't do it now. This man must be paid out before we can leave the house—and I have no dresses fit to go in."

"Oh! it must be managed," said her father. "If only I wasn't laid by the heels like this I'd contrive something. Why, I've told you her son is one of the best matches of the day. Not go? And perhaps 'tis the very chance we've been looking for. Nonsense, Kate! You must pluck up courage and put a bright face on matters. We've got a week to look about us. Something is sure to 'turn up.'"

Cornelius O'Brien had a Micawber-like belief in that contingency, which was always to put his affairs to rights, and unravel the hopeless tangle of his difficulties. Kate did not share that belief—perhaps from a long experience of its futility.

She listened with passive hopelessness as her father enlarged on the hundred and one things that "might" happen between now and the promised visit. It did not hold out any special attraction for her. As for Lady Jocelyn's son, she had heard he was a young man of weak mind and feeble body whose tastes inclined to the exhilarating attraction of the music-hall, and the no less dangerous allurements of the gaming-table. His mother was anxious he should be married, as she was confident a wife could reform him. Of how the "reformer" would take to her office, or whether the task would be as agreeable as necessary, did not enter her head. Once get the wife, the rest would be easy; so she thought with the fond infatuation of mothers of "only sons." There was no lack of mothers with "only," or indeed many, daughters who quite endorsed Lady Jocelyn's opinion, and were quite Christianly anxious to allow one of these self-sacrificing young missionaries to go forth on the good work. The young man, however, was obstinately determined not to settle down, and not to be "reformed," so there was still a pleasant atmosphere of hope and uncertainty about the various house-parties at Croft, at every one of which the young sultan was supposed to be about to throw the handkerchief in token of his choice.

Lady Jocelyn was only a recent acquaintance of Cornelius O'Brien's, but she had taken a great fancy to the genial, amusing and always entertaining Irishman, and had called on Kate before leaving town in order to personally invite her to Croft.

That invitation looked hopeless now, with all these new complications. A girl cannot stay at a country house without some decent dresses, to say nothing of hats, boots, gloves and other articles necessary to the completion of the feminine toilette. But Kate knew it was well-nigh impossible to procure them; and as she listened to her father's vague belief that all would "pull right," and his animadversions on his hard-hearted persecutors, she grew more despondent.

She left the room at last, and went down to interview Biddy as to housekeeping matters, being, as yet, happily ignorant of the manner in which that worthy personage had been spending her Christmas Eve.

Fletcher had duly intimated to her that her condition on the previous midnight had been more worthy of a "potheen boy" in her own country than of a respectable domestic holding a position of responsibility.

"Shure now, I wasn't as bad as ye'd be makin' out," answered Biddy. "And it isn't Miss Kate, the blessed angel, that would be hard on me, just for a glass with a friend, is it? — though I was upset by raison of not bein' used to it—and that's thrue enough, since I left the ould country. But whist, Fletcher, man; don't be for spakin' of last night to Miss Kate. Shure 'tis she has the trouble on her purty shoulders wid'out Biddy—worse luck—adding to it this blessed Christmas morn."

"Oh, I ain't agoin' to peach," said Fletcher magnanimously. "Only don't do it again, Biddy, or you

may find yourself landed in the police court and a case of 'fine,' or seven days. Then where'd you be?"

"In the cells, sorra a doubt," laughed Biddy. "Maybe 'tis not so bad they are. What do *you* think, Mister Fletcher?"

"Females," observed Fletcher irrelevantly, "are sharp, and Irish females more especial, but sharp or not I ain't a goin' to let any female whatsoever know my business, nor where I've been, in my time. Not but what I've seen some rum starts—Lord! I should think so—raythe r."

He pronounced that word with an accent, out of compliment to Biddy.

She was bustling about the kitchen, intent on culinary operations.

"Shure, and the pudding's made," she exclaimed. "Was it Miss Kate did that?" she asked the bailiff.

"I never seed her," answered that worthy man. "I was out."

"Out! that's against the rules. Ye'll be after lavin' your situation, Mister Fletcher."

"Oh, I left a substitute," said Fletcher, loftily. "He's coming again," he added. "He helped put you to bed last night, Biddy."

"Like his impudence, and yours too," said Biddy, wrathfully. "'Twas only a bit unsteady I was—just a wilfulness in the legs—my head was right enough, the saints be praised."

Fletcher laughed silently, as one who enjoys a secret joke.

"Hadn't you better boil the pudding, since it is made?" he suggested. "Miss Kate and you will

want it for dinner, no doubt. Ah, here she comes," he added suddenly.

"Good-morning, Fletcher," said the girl as she entered the kitchen. "I hope you found your daughter better than you expected."

"She's pretty bad, Miss, but she won't die," said the man, touching his forehead respectfully.

"That was a very—superior sort of young man who took your place last night," continued Kate. "Not a regular bailiff, was he?"

Fletcher looked somewhat embarrassed for a moment. The memory of a substantial "tip" was keenly before him, also of sundry promises of secrecy and reticence exacted on the previous night.

"Well, Miss," he said with an apologetic cough, "I suppose he's not quite a regular professional, if it comes to that; but Lord! he takes to it like a good 'un," he added, enthusiastically; "offers to work time about with me so as to give me a few hours off. You see, Miss, it's rather hard on one man; we generally has help, but—we're uncommon busy just now, uncommon busy," he added, as if that was a satisfactory reflection.

"Oh," said Kate, "then he will be here again."

"To-night—two hours off," answered Fletcher, "meaning me," he added as the girl looked somewhat puzzled. "I takes two hours off, he stays in my place, turn and turn about, until such time as the temporary—inconvenience, can be arranged."

"I'm afraid that won't be very soon, Fletcher," said the girl despondently. "Twenty pounds"

"Nineteen and ninepence half-penny," added Fletcher apologetically. "That's the debt, Miss."

"Well, twenty-one pounds," said Kate, "is a sum not easily raised."

"That's thrue for you," interrupted Biddy, who had hitherto kept a discreet silence, "though there's a matther of silver that ye mightn't be just immadiately in need of? Shure the master could drink his coffee or his tay out of the chaney pot for a week or two."

"He's so very particular," sighed Kate.

"A many of them are," observed Fletcher, with a sniff that might or might not have been intended as contemptuous. "I've noticed it; specially gents. It's wonderful what the ladies will put up with, and how they'll go denyin' of themselves; but from my point of view of human natur', Miss, the gents are most always a bit selfish and exacting. Most always," he repeated thoughtfully, as his eyes rested on the sad and troubled beauty of the girl's face.

She changed the subject by turning to Biddy.

"I made the pudding," she said. "Have you put it on to boil?"

"It's just what I was doin', Miss Kate, when you came in the kitchen that same blessed minnit."

"By the way, you were very late last night," said Kate.

"I was," agreed Biddy cheerfully. "I—I met some friends, Miss—and we had a chat and a glass together; shure I'd not be deceivin' you about a thrifle like that. I was surprised myself, Miss Kate, when the clocks struck. But I did all my messages safe enough.

There's a power o' things in the larder there—not forgetting a drop o' whiskey for the master when he's able to drink it."

"I would rather you had only bought what was strictly necessary," said the girl.

"And isn't the drop o' comfort necessary? and he, poor man, that wake and low in his spirits, and all that doctor's stuff poured into his poor stomach day for day. Ah, whist now, Miss Kate, and don't be for findin' fault wid me. I know the master's ways, lavin' alone his tastes."

Kate sighed and said no more.

CHAPTER VI.

A "DOUBLE" SOMEWHERE.

"THAT's a mighty strange young man that's stayin' for Fletcher," remarked Biddy, as she brought Kate's modest dinner upstairs that evening. "When I was dishing the pudding up he says to me, I'll make the sauce, Biddy,' he says, and thrue for ye, Miss Kate, he did that same, and the beautiful sauce it is. Lemon and butter, and sugar, and the drop o' brown brandy, and all melted together in the oven. Shure 'tis fit for the Quane herself. Wait till ye see it. For all the world like liquid gowld."

Kate smiled at her abigail's enthusiasm. "You had better ask him to have some of the pudding himself," she said, "since he has done so much for it."

"Well, you see, Miss Kate," said Biddy doubtfully, "he's a very supayrior young man. Not like that ould omadhaun Fletcher at all, at all. And I'm not sure he'd be takin' it as a compliment if I asked him to sit down wid me, though he did say, and gospel truth it is, Miss; 'Biddy,' says he, 'save me a slice o' that pudding and I'll give you a bran new half crown,' he says. 'Sure' I says, 'you're welcome to the slice; tisn't Biddy Callaghan would be lookin' for paymint, nor the likes o' any one in this house would be grudgin' food and drink to friend or

inimy on this blessed night, and I'll ask Miss Kate this same minnit,' I says. 'Oh no,' he says, 'you mustn't be after doin' that. I don't want her to know that I only value it because she made it.' There, Miss, those were his very words, or may I die for it this blessed minute."

Kate laughed. "He is certainly a very strange young man. I thought so last night."

"And a moighty great traveller too. He's been in Ameriky, not to mention a hape o' haythenish places that me tongue couldn't pronounce. Maybe that's what makes him so supayrior, Miss Kate."

"No doubt," said Kate absently. "But go down now, Biddy ; I'll ring when I want you."

She did not eat her dinner with any great appetite —it was more to please Biddy, and to keep up an appearance of celebrating the day that she was dining in solitary state now. But soon she pushed her plate aside, and leaning her head on her hand gave herself up to reflections that certainly were neither festive, nor agreeable.

"How long will it go on," she sighed. "How long? I am so sick of it—and I can do nothing, nothing at all. Oh, it is miserable to be a woman, to have one's hands tied, one's limbs fettered by conventionalities and prejudice. How gladly I would work ; but I am so useless ! There is my life drifting—drifting along, and only the hope of what my father calls a 'good marriage,' to lift me and himself, too, out of this slough of despond. . . A marriage ! How despicable it seems—to sell oneself for a little ease and comfort—a strange man's

gold and name. Ugh! it sounds revolting! and yet it is done every day—every day praised by the world, blessed by the church—and I suppose I shall do it too. I thought once I never could, but now any life would seem better than this. Perhaps if I go to Croft, though that seems rather impossible, I may capture the hopeful youth. 'Sir Wilfred Jocelyn and Lady Jocelyn'—it sounds well enough!"

Then she laughed bitterly, and rose and rang the bell, and Biddy presently appeared with the pudding standing proudly amidst a sea of flames and adorned with a sprig of holly.

"Shure, 'tis grand, Miss," she said admiringly. "But wait till you see the sauce, lave alone taste it, for the young man, he ladled me out some in a tay-cup, for 'good luck,' he said. He's rare good company, Miss Kate. I'm sorry for you bein' so lonesome up here, but shure it's myself has always said 'The quality may be grand, and moighty supayrior in their ways o' eatin' and drinkin', but sorra a bit o' comfort or fun do they get out o' their grandeur.'"

"You must come up here and have a glass of wine presently, Biddy, as you always do on Christmas day, and perhaps you'd better ask the young man up also."

"Shure and he'll be proud to accipt—I'll answer for that," said Biddy, "though if I might be suggestin', Miss Kate, its a drop o' punch the likes o' us would be for choosin'; wine is all very well for the quality."

"By all means, have punch," laughed Kate. "But where are the ingredients?"

"Wasn't I after telling ye I'd bought the potheen last night, and 'tis there in the sideboard now, for fear o' temptation."

"Wouldn't it be better to take it downstairs, and make your punch yourselves?"

"Now, Miss Kate," said Biddy, reproachfully, "would ye be denyin' us the pleasure and honour o' your company, and on this night, too? Shure if the master was down, he'd be tellin' ye different. Well do I mind the time when he'd have ivery mother's child o' us up in the big dining-room at Ballyvughan, and himself ladlin' out the punch-bowl, and the ladies and gintlemen laughin' and shoutin', and telling stories—and the ructions afterwards! Ah, those were the good ould days, Miss Kate, and no mistake."

"They left bad enough results," said Kate, ruefully.

"Arrah, whist now, the luck is bound to turn. Didn't I pick up a horseshoe thrown down that blessed minnit just at our very door, and only to-night didn't a black cat come and sit itself down on the windy-sill beyant, and there the craythur's in the kitchen now, and as at home as any Christian. Take my word for it, Miss Kate, dear, something's in store for ye. Maybe the rich husband we've talked about so often. Ah, but 'tis kapin' ye I am, and you not ating your pudding at all. Will I be saying ye liked the sauce?"

"It is delicious. Did he really make it?"

"That I'll swear he did, wid the beautiful, nate, light hands o' him. I'm thinkin', Miss Kate, 'tis just as well there's no maids in the kitchen, for, what

with his handsome face and his pleasant ways, he'd be stalin' the hearts o' them mighty aisy."

"Good-evening, Miss."

The young man was demurely grave, but something of mischief or amusement lurked in the blue eyes, as they met the puzzled wonder of Kate's grave orbs.

"Good evening, I have to thank you for your culinary efforts on my behalf. You have a great many accomplishments."

"I have picked them up at odd moments, and in my travels."

"Men of your position do not usually have such opportunities of travel and leisure."

"Perhaps not. I have been lucky. When I was young I was taken to America by a rich uncle. I learnt a great deal there."

He had certainly done so. Audacity and inventiveness, to judge from his conversation, and its remarkable powers of unveracity.

"I wonder," said Kate, "you did not stay in the States. Surely there is a larger opening, and greater scope for skilled labour, than in this over-populated country."

"I should have stayed there, but, unfortunately, I quarrelled with my uncle, and so concluded that the American continent wasn't quite big enough to hold us both, He elected to remain there, and I—well, I came back to London."

"Do you like your work?"

"Candidly, Miss, I do not. My friends say I'm

very idle, but that's only because I like to look about and see what others are doing, to go to meetings and attend Socialist lectures to discover the meaning of strikes and the real wrongs of the working classes. As a rule, they don't know themselves what they want or how to get it."

"And while you are doing all this, you don't work," said the girl, looking at him with increasing interest.

"That is just it, Miss," he said eagerly. "And that's how it happens I'm out now on this"—he looked apologetic and as if the word he ought to use was not the word he would choose had he any option—"this little job, Miss," he concluded.

Kate flushed slightly.

"I dare say it is only another side of life to study," she said. "Probably Fletcher can assist you to many more if—if you desire it."

"If I might make so bold, Miss," said the strange young man, "is the—the debt very heavy, because of course it must be very inconvenient to have such a thing happen; and—there's ways and means of raising money, Miss, that I might suggest if—if I could speak to your father."

Kate laughed a little bitterly.

"I'm afraid you could suggest no novelty to him in the way of raising money," she said, a certain hopelessness and dreariness in her voice that cut the sympathetic young bailiff to the heart. "It's only going from bad to worse. The more one borrows the heavier the debt, and the more hopeless the re-

payment. So-called 'temporary accommodation' is full of horror to me."

"They are rather ensnaring words," said the young man thoughtfully. "Only it depends on who offers it, doesn't it, Miss?"

"I suppose so," said Kate, wearily. "But I did not ask you up here to talk about debts and difficulties," she added abruptly; "only to take a glass of wine, or, if you prefer it, punch—in honour of the day. I believe Biddy is brewing it."

"Yes, she is," he answered, inwardly breathing a hope that that estimable female would not hurry herself over the mysterious preparation. "It is very kind of you to honour me by asking me up here to drink it."

"Do you know," said Kate abruptly, "I am sure I have seen you before, and spoken to you too. I wish I could recollect where."

She was resting her firm little chin on her hand, and looked at him, as she spoke, with those steady, fearless eyes that had already done so much mischief.

"Perhaps in a shop," he suggested meekly.

"You said you were a cabinet-maker," said Kate musingly. "Perhaps you work for some of the big shops. I may have seen you there, or given you an order?"

The young man shook his head abstractedly, doubtfully, as one who is following a suggestion through a mental labyrinth of possibility. "There are so many faces like each other," he remarked. "Haven't you ever noticed, Miss, in the streets?"

Kate laughed. "No," she said. "I've only noticed the curious *unlikeness* one face bears to another, considering how the race is multiplied, year by year. Nature must be wonderfully skilful in her combinations."

"Well," said the young man audaciously, "I really think there's more likeness in faces than we imagine —if we think them out. Besides, you know, Miss," he added almost eagerly, "they say that every person has their double somewhere in the world. Perhaps you've seen my double."

"Perhaps I have," said Kate, laughing. "You don't happen to have done so, I suppose?"

"I've heard before," said the young man frankly, "that I am very like some one else—curiously like—only he's a gentleman, rich and in society, and much thought of. Perhaps you may have met him, Miss, at a ball, or a flower show or something."

"I think not," said Kate, "but if I did," she paused half smiling—"it would be odd," she said, "if I mistook the 'gentleman in society' for you, would it not? By the way, what's your name?"

"My name? Oh—Smith," said the young man coolly—"Tom Smith, Miss, at your service."

The girl laughed. "There are a great many Smiths in the world," she said. "I wonder if there is a certain family likeness among them."

"I expect there is," said this special "Smith," "Naturally there would be."

"Oh, of course," said Kate, looking steadily at him. "Naturally—there would be. But why have you told me a falsehood—Tom Smith?"

CHAPTER VII.

A "TOAST" AND ITS CONSEQUENCE.

WHAT that conscience-stricken and surprised young man might have said must for ever remain unrecorded, for at the instant when he was about to speak the door opened to admit Biddy bearing a tray with glasses, and a steaming jug of punch.

"Ye'll not get better stuff than that this side o' Cork, Miss Kate. Shure, the master himself has just been telling me that same."

"Has my father been having some, Biddy?" asked Kate, alarmed. "Now you know what the doctor said——"

"The doctor! Oh, now, is it the doctor you'd be after minding?" scoffed Biddy with deep contempt. "Shure, Miss Kate, it's little enough they know, and a power o' harm they do. I niver had a doctor but onst, thank the Lord. I was that bad I did send for one —cowld and shivering and hot with faver all at once and the same minnit. And a fine gentleman—with his white linen as stiff as a board—and a gowld watch and chain—and a sale ring on his finger, he comes and looks at me, and sez he—'Put out your tongue.' 'Savin' your presence, sor,' I sez, 'it's not the likes o' me would be so impurlite—lavin' alone that 'tis

my stomich that's bad, not to spake of ivery bone in my body achin' for all the world as if I'd been battered with a rolling pin.'

"'Put out your tongue,' he sez again.

"'And shure how'd I be describing my symptoms, sor,' I sez, 'if I was to hang my tongue out o' my mouth like a dog that's nadin'a dhrink?' I sez.

"Well he sez something that sounded like a bad word or two, and he laves my tongue alone, and takes my wrist and looks at his big gowld watch for all the world as solemn as a judge who's afther condemning a fellow crayture, and there he stands, looking first at me and then at the watch. 'Your pulse is moighty quick,' he sez. 'You must kape quiet and I 'll send you some powders. They 'll do you good.' Well, if you'll belave me, Miss Kate, he went away, and prisintly the powders came, and I saw written on them, 'The Emetic. One to be taken immadiately and the other one hour after—if no effect.' Well, I took one, and shure I was that sick for all the wurrld as if I was crossing from Dublin to Holyhead. 'Well,' sez I, 'it's mighty little use giving a midicine that won't stay five minnits on a poor sick craythur's stomich. However, I'll try the other one; fair play's a jule, and having had a docther, shure 'tis but right to take his advice.' Now may the divil fly away wid me, Miss Kate, if it's not true what I'm tellin' ye. I took the other powder, and shure I couldn't be kapin' that down one minnit, lave alone five. And that's all the good *that* docther did me. I've niver had another."

Kate laughed. "But, Biddy," she said, "don't you know the powders were to make you sick? That's the meaning of an emetic."

"It may be the maning of it," said Biddy, still indignant; "but what's the use of payin' for a thing that one can't kape down. Shure, I had to pay for those powders, just the same."

The young carpenter laughed heartily.

"I've heard a story rather like that before, Biddy," he said. "Was it really an experience?"

"I'd be obliged if ye wouldn't be usin' such grand words," said Biddy. "But if ye mane did it happen to meself, shure I'd scorn to be tellin' a lie about such a thrifle."

"Well, the punch will be getting cold," interposed Kate, rising. "Now, Biddy, here's your glass," and she poured out a tumblerful of the clear steaming beverage, "and yours—Smith," she added gravely, and with something of rebuke in her eyes as she met the glance of the ex-bailiff. "It's an old Irish custom to assemble all the household on Christmas night to drink health and prosperity to friends and relations. This is rather a limited household now," she added with a sigh. "But there's no reason we shouldn't wish for better days. Heaven knows we need them."

"Amen to that," said Biddy in a low voice. "Shure, 'tis my heart's best wishes and prayers for ye, Miss Kate, dear, that ye have this blessed night! And ye must drink the toast yourself, honey," she added persuasively, "else there'll be no luck for ye. Shure

now 'tis as mild as mother's milk. Didn't I mix ivery ingradient of it myself?"

Kate smiled as she poured out a wine-glassful of the mixture; then she raised the glass. The other two, dutifully observant, did the same.

"What a strange trio we make!" thought the girl as they drank the toast; Biddy with enthusiasm, Smith as one who thoughtfully considers a subject, and is uncertain in mind as to where that subject may lead him, Kate with wistful eyes and but faint hope in the accomplishment of the good wishes she heard and uttered. Then the glasses, were set down on the table, Biddy and Smith returned to the kitchen and Kate went upstairs to sit with the invalid.

. . . . . .

"Biddy," said the young bailiff thoughtfully as he watched that energetic female bustling about the kitchen—"Biddy, do you think it possible that I might see Mr. O'Brien privately on a little matter of business?"

"And what business would the likes o' you be after havin' with the master, unless it's botherin' him for money, and ye may just as well save yourself that trouble," answered Biddy, looking wrathful and indignant at the suggestion.

"I won't bother him for money," said the young man. "I could perhaps show him a way to *get* some. That's what I meant."

"Oh," said Biddy, regarding him doubtfully. "If that's what ye meant I'd soon be after helpin' ye to see him as privately as ye wish. Poor man!" and she

sighed pityingly, "'tis main and hard on him that he should be always in debt and throuble ; and Miss Kate, bless her, 'tis the hard life she's had for many and many a year. And look now," she burst out indignantly, "with the finest chance in the wurrld at makin' a grand match, and enjoyin' herself with the best o' the quality, and all stopped in a minnit by raison o' the likes o' ye!"

"Of me," echoed the young man, somewhat bewildered and not altogether pleased at the information contained in one part of Biddy's speech.

"Well, shure they can't go visitin' into the counthry when there's this throuble in the house," said Biddy. "And poor Miss Kate lookin' forrard to it, and the lords and ladies all ready to worship her, for shure she's jist a quane among them, wid the beauty and the grand air of her, not to mintion her knowledge of forrin' tongues and her swate voice whin she's singin', that would break the heart o' a stone, if it had one."

"And so," said the young man, pale and thoughtful now—"and so, Biddy, they were asked on a visit to a grand house to meet—lords and ladies?"

"Thrue for you," said Biddy, "and one o' thim's to be Miss Kate's husband. At laste the master says so, and the gintleman's mother she's agrayable, and Miss Kate——"

"Well," said the young man more eagerly, "what about Miss Kate herself?"

"Shure she doesn't bother her head in the matter at all, at all," said Biddy loftily. "Why should she? There's not the man livin', lord or no lord, that could

be worth the likes o' her. And though she's not seen the gintleman——"

"Oh," interrupted the young man, "she's not seen this intended husband—yet."

So radiant, so relieved was his face that Biddy could not help wondering a little at the change.

"Ye look mighty plazed at that," she said, setting her arms akimbo, and scanning him severely. "What's Miss Kate's bizness to do wid you, Mr. Smith?"

"Oh, nothing; nothing, of course," answered Smith confusedly, "only that I'm a little—a little interested you see, because if it's so important that she should go on this visit to meet her—her future husband, Biddy, why, that makes it all the more necessary that I should see Mr. O'Brien and speak to him about an accommodation."

"Accommodation! Is it payin' the debt ye mane? Ah, shure, master's had enough of thim dirty money-lenders, with their 'plaumausing' ways and their thaving interest. Ah, no, Mr. Smith, ye can't be helpin' him, unless ye can find an honest man who'd be advancin' him a sum, to be repayed at his own convayniance, and say—a thrifle per cent. interest on the loan. And I'm thinking," she added, taking up the punch jug and pouring its contents abstractedly into her glass,—"I say I'm thinking, Mr. Smith, that only the angel Gabriel himself would iver do the likes o' that."

Smith wisely abstained from an argument respecting the angel Gabriel's capabilities for money-lending.

He was far too interested in Biddy's communication to let her stray from the subject.

With the aid of the enticing liquor of which she was partaking somewhat injudiciously, he managed at last to extract all the information he desired,—the extent of the debt, the amount in hand necessary to equip Miss Kate for the promised visit, and the useful "surplus" that ought to be in hand for what Biddy termed "any thrifling contingincies."

He sat by the fire absorbed and thoughtful while the loquacious Irishwoman poured out a stream of never-ending talk.

"Shall I do it?" he thought. "They would never know, never guess, and yet"—he sighed heavily—"I'm only serving a rival, only throwing her into the arms of temptation. But then, what would she be worth if she couldn't stand the test. Oh, Kate—proud, beautiful Kate—I—I must know you true, as well as proud, noble as well as beautiful; and if it's wealth you need, Kate, Heaven knows you can have it, freely, ungrudgingly. But will your heart go with you, Kate? Can you love for love's sake only?"

And again he sighed—insomuch that Biddy waxed irate, and demanded to know if he considered himself "dacent company for a lonesome famale," and furthermore added that it would be just as lively to have the rats and black beetles "kapin' Christmas" with her as this silent and seemingly oppressed youth.

Further rebukes, however, were stayed by the appearance of Fletcher to "relieve guard," and so Smith

took his way homewards through the quiet streets and under the black and starless sky, thinking to himself how small a thing may affect a man's life, and alter its whole tenor and circumstance by its very insignificance.

. . . . . .

"I wished her health, peace, and prosperity," he thought. "The first is not in my power to give, but the last—well, it is a dangerous experiment; but I've begun, and now I don't want to go back."

He pushed back the fair curly hair that he had dragged over his eyes, and laughed a little as at some amusing reflection.

"How prettily she said that 'Why have you told me a falsehood—Tom Smith?' Heaven bless you, Kate. I would rather have wooed you fairly, straightforwardly if I could, but the fates were against it, and now I don't want to confess my folly until I'm quite sure of pardon. And so—" he squared his shoulders, and a smile, tender, bashful, yet half triumphant touched his lips, then faded into gravity once again. "And so," he continued, "I'll work now in real, serious earnest. Truly, as the plays have it, 'The plot thickens. We must dissemble.'"

CHAPTER VIII.

A HOPEFUL PROSPECT.

"KATE, my dear," said Cornelius O'Brien to his daughter some two days later, "I—I am glad to say my little temporary difficulty is over. I've managed to raise the necessary. The landsharks are appeased, and here—" drawing forth a bulky pocket-book from which he extracted a ten pound note—"here is something for you to purchase any little things you require for the visit to Croft. It's only for a week or two,—so don't be extravagant."

Extravagant!—Poor Kate, when she knew only too well that that note would not cover the expense of even one gown of Lady Jocelyn's, or any of the guests assembled under her roof.

However, if they excelled her in point of toilette, she could carry off the palm of beauty and youth. The more simply and severely she dressed, the better she always looked. She had but brief time, however, to make her preparations. Fortunately her dark tweed dress was almost new, and would serve admirably for travelling and ordinary country wear. But for evening—there came the difficulty! Two dresses at least would be necessary, even if that well-worn black velvet could be utilised at a pinch for a third. There was a long consultation with Biddy

and the little dressmaker who worked by the day, and who could not "suggest," though she was clever enough to follow out skilful direction, or when guided by taste. Kate possessed excellent taste, and that faculty of "making the best" of even poor materials which is so useful to girls who must dress on small means.

As time was so limited she bought her two evening-dresses ready-made as far as skirts were concerned; the bodies were turned out by herself and the dress-maker with a daring originality that would have astonished the shop-keeper who sold what was termed "Elegant costumes, with material for bodices included," at prices varying from three to seven guineas. One dress was of black and white striped silk, which Kate trimmed skilfully with jet, the other of daffodil-coloured satin, perfectly plain and moulded to the beautiful figure of the wearer with an ease and perfection of "fit" that challenged Bond Street, itself. Three guineas out of the ten remained, and now, let all young ladies with moderate allowances listen with bated breath, for not only did this extraordinary girl manage boots and gloves, and one hat, but a veritable *chef-d'œuvre* in the way of a tea-gown. A tea-gown of pale cinnamon-coloured cashmere, relieved by touches of gold. The said gold-trimming, however (not to deceive my fair readers) had been a lucky purchase at a sale the previous summer; being, as Kate had at once descried, a veritable bargain, and capable of being turned to many uses. It made the tea-gown a thing of perfection,—when Kate wore it. One cannot, of course, affirm that it would have

looked so well on a less perfect figure, or set off by less richness of colouring. Indeed, Kate's dusky bronze hair, and dark-lashed eyes, and creamy skin with its lovely tints of cheek and lips would have set off sackcloth itself.

However, she managed to make all her preparations by the day fixed by Lady Jocelyn, and packed her modest little trunk, and saw to her father's necessities, and was ready and waiting for him a full half-hour before he appeared.

Biddy was fussing about, brimful of anxiety, and showering blessings and prayers for good luck on her young mistress, with tearful eloquence.

"Shure 'tis I'll be lonesome widout ye, Miss," she said wiping her eyes. "'Tis sorry I am now that the bailiffs was paid off, for they was company loike."

"You've never heard of either of them, have you, Biddy?" Kate asked, as she bent over the fastening of her glove.

"Divil a word, Miss, but many's the time I've thought o' that young man, more especially since I contrived that he should see the master.

"My father?" asked Kate in astonishment, "what did he want to see him about, Biddy?"

"Sorra a bit I know, Miss Kate, unless he was after suggestin' some new agint for borrowin'. But the master he was moighty plazed about it, and you know yourself, Miss Kate, he paid off thim horse-laiches at onst."

"Yes," said Kate, the flush on her cheek wavering and deepening, "but I never knew, Biddy, that Smith had seen my father. You should have told me."

"Ah, now, and why should I be botherin' your pretty head, Miss Kate, dear. Shure the trouble's over now, and you must jist be enjoyin' yourself and thinking only how beautiful ye are, and of the fine gentlemen as will be wantin' to marry ye, whin they sees you looking jist for all the wurrld like the goddess Vanus herself, in your lovely, gowlden gown."

Kate laughed at Biddy's ignorance of heathen mythology as conveyed by this speech, but she did not feel bound to correct her ideas on the subject of the Queen of Beauty's usual attire, or more correctly speaking, want of attire.

This mysterious young bailiff had troubled her thoughts a good deal, and she was quite unprepared for this last piece of news respecting him. Could he really have assisted her father out of his difficulty? It seemed impossible, and yet, he might be acquainted with some loan-office, or some private money-lender who was willing to "accommodate" even the impecunious Cornelius O'Brien.

"I must ask my father about it," she said to herself as she heard that tardy individual at last approaching.

It was not, however, until they were settled in a second-class compartment of the London and South-Western Co.'s carriages, *en route* for Lady Jocelyn's seat in Hampshire that an opportunity offered to ask that question.

The day was clear and frosty. The reign of King Fog was over, and Cornelius O'Brien was in one of those genial and almost child-like moods that distinguished him when debts were staved off, and ease and luxury in prospect.

His exuberant spirits and his flow of conversation were in strange contrast to his daughter's grave face and comparative silence. In all his difficulties and embarrassments it always had seemed to her as if she was the criminal, while her father took up the rôle of the injured party. It was very odd how he managed to convey that impression—but perhaps no less odd than that peculiar irresponsible manner of his which seemed perpetually to deprecate any grave importance being attached to his actions, which threw them aside with all their difficulties and obligations as airily as a child might have thrown aside a toy.

Kate never knew whether she blamed or envied him this capacity. But she knew only too well that a fear always lurked in her own mind as to what might be the result of this tendency to accept temporary relief, without the least consideration for the trouble it might entail.

"Father," she said at last, "you've not told me how you managed to pay off the bailiff, and—get this money. It was all so sudden."

"It was, my dear, very sudden, but none the less welcome, Kate. I'm sure you must allow that."

"Welcome enough, if——"

"Now, now, Kate, no 'ifs,' and no gloomy faces or forebodings. It's all right, and we've only got to enjoy ourselves. Sufficient unto the day, etc. You know, my dear——"

"Still," persisted Kate, "I should like to know."

"So like a woman," said her father, shaking his head reproachfully. "Now, my dear, with all your excellent sense and quiet habits of usefulness, and

capacity for making money almost elastic in its powers—with all those excellent qualities why are you curious? Isn't it sufficient to know these extremely disagreeable people are paid off, and that here we are on our way to a delightful house, and with every prospect of a delightful visit?—that we can forget debts and—and bailiffs, and bad cooking, and various other discomforts which I regret to say make up for me that much bepraised abode called 'Home,'—isn't all this sufficient for you, my dear, without drawing my memory back to—well, decidedly unpleasant subjects?"

"I only thought," said Kate, "that it was rather sudden; and that perhaps—Smith——"

"What on earth put that into your head?" said O'Brien, rather sharply. "Smith—what could he have to do with the matter?"

"Only that he asked to see you for the purpose of suggesting some accommodation."

"Did he tell you so?"

"No—it was Biddy who told me."

"Biddy is a d——d meddling old Irishwoman. I wouldn't keep her a day, only—only—well, she's been so long in the family."

"And never asks for her wages—and does the work of two servants," said Kate quietly.

O'Brien laughed again.

"Well, as to wages, what would she be doing with money? Only spending it on nonsense, or getting into mischief. It's quite safe with me. I'm a sort of bank where she has a deposit account. It will all be paid up some day."

"A great many people besides Biddy have heard that statement," Kate remarked.

"And very undutiful of you to be reminding me that they have," said her father. "Upon my word, Kate, you'll make me ill-tempered before we get to Croft; and so inconsiderate of you, too, when I'm only recovering from illness—and after all I did to fit you out creditably for this visit. However I got the money, you must allow I spent precious little of it on myself."

"And you won't tell me how you did get it," persisted Kate.

"No—d——n it——I will not!" said her father angrily. "One would think I was a child, Kate, and couldn't manage my own affairs. You're just like your mother, always nagging and worrying a man. That's not the way to please a husband, let me tell you . . . and if you do get one, and you lead him such a life as you've led me, why, you'll find yourself in the Divorce Court before many years. . . . That's the truth, whether you like it or not."

"It would depend on the man whether I liked it," said Kate. "There might be worse things to bear than freedom, even bought at such a price."

"You're an ungrateful girl," said her father. "I wish you were well married and settled. Really a grown-up daughter is a great responsibility for a man. Now I hope there'll be no nonsense about Jocelyn. If you can catch him, why, the match would be the making of you—and of me," he added softly as an afterthought.

"I expect he's detestable," said Kate gloomily.

"Phooh! What does it matter if he is?" said Cornelius O'Brien airily. "You don't mind my having a cigarette, my dear? . . . I've been denied one so long owing to that confounded doctor. . . . What was I saying. Oh, about Sir Wilfred. He's a soft youth, very easily managed—he'd make an excellent son-in-law, and it's a shame to think of all that money going to waste, as—well, as undoubtedly it is, for want of some one to manage him,—and it."

He thought to himself how well he could manage that fortune, of which so large a portion ran to waste by the aid of music-hall belles, and "touts" and billiard markers.

As he leant back and smoked one cigarette after another he let his thoughts flow pleasantly and soothingly on the current of such a delightful possibility as this handling of Sir Wilfred Jocelyn's fortune. He contemplated his daughter critically and yet with satisfaction. She was certainly "good style"—a girl whom any man might be proud to win—a girl made, so he told himself, to carry off diamonds, and do the honours of a wealthy man's house, and sit royally at his table, a credit to his wealth and taste.

As one who views a promising territory running to waste, so he viewed and criticised this fair piece of womanhood, which—to him—was such a doubtful blessing, but of whose marketable value he was confident.

"Well, I hope she'll hit it off," he reflected. "But I'd better not say too much, girls are so queer, and so devilish romantic. We'll leave it to Providence!"

CHAPTER IX.

FRIENDSHIP—WITH VARIATIONS.

THE lights of Croft glimmered brightly on the frosty air, as the carriage bore Kate and her father up the leafless avenue.

O'Brien was in radiant spirits, but the girl grew more and more depressed as they neared the magnificent mansion whose hospitality she was to share for the next fortnight. She had stayed at country-houses, but never at one so magnificent as this.

When the carriage stopped at the door, and it was flung open to show the luxurious interior of the great hall, rosy in atmosphere of warmth and light, with an array of "fair women and brave men," with the sound of low voices and musical laughter and the tinkling of tea-cups, and the gorgeous liveries of footmen moving to and fro, and the shimmer of satins and silks that gave an enchanting prospect of tea-gowns, elaborate in simplicity,—when all this was revealed to Kate's dazzled eyes she felt as one who suddenly treads the portal of an unknown temple.

A temple of Fashion and Wealth dedicated to the Goddess of Society—a temple in which home-made gowns of cotton-backed satin, and memories of

debts and bailiffs had surely no place. But the girl, however nervous she felt, never betrayed it by the quiver of an eyelash. Her gracious ease and self-possession, as she returned Lady Jocelyn's greeting, delighted that lady, who admired "style" above all things, deeming mere beauty a secondary consideration. But Kate had both.

She called her son, and he lounged forward from his place by the fire, his hands in the pockets of his shooting coat, his fair, vacuous face, and pale, watery eyes, and short, ungraceful figure looking at their very worst in contrast to the beauty and taste of his surroundings.

"How do?—very pleased, I'm shaw," he drawled as he put out a languid hand in greeting. Kate's eyes flashed one sweeping, comprehensive glance at him—a glance that somehow startled and mesmerised even his tepid powers of admiration into sudden warmth and wonder.

"By Jove!" he muttered to himself, falling back a step or two, and keeping his eyes fixed on Kate in a bewildered stare, "what a doosid fine gal! By Jove! beats Belle Beverley and Flossie Gaylark into fits! By Jove! she does."

Kate took no further notice of him, but chatted pleasantly and frankly with Lady Jocelyn, who possessed that rare gift of putting people at once at their ease that is invaluable to a hostess.

She was not impressed agreeably by the pale, unwholesome face, the nervous lips, and stable-yard manners of Sir Wilfred.

Cornelius O'Brien, however, fastened at once upon

him, and his genial face and voice, and pleasant flow of talk quite delighted that amiable youth.

"Sort of man, don't you know, saves one all the trouble of talking, and seems to put good things into your mouth while he says them himself—awful jolly old boy."

In this fashion Sir Wilfred summed up the Irishman to a select circle of friends in the smoking-room later on.

Meanwhile Kate had moved over to the tea-table by the side of her hostess. A group of girls and two or three young men were lounging, or standing about; an eccentric-looking lady in a gown of brilliant green silk, slightly toned down by black lace, was evidently relating a story with a richness of brogue and an irresistible touch of humour that at once proclaimed her nationality. Beside her stood a tall young man, his fair hair cut close and short to his head in a somewhat hard and unbecoming fashion, and attired in a knickerbocker suit of dark tweed. As they approached Lady Jocelyn addressed him.

"Mr. Rivers," she said, "please look after my young friend; she's only just arrived.—Miss O'Brien, let me introduce to you—Mr. Tom Rivers."

The young man bowed calmly, gravely, with a cool unconsciousness that did credit to his nerves, but Kate, as she returned the greeting, flushed scarlet to her very brow, and a look of perplexity and wonder came into her deep grey eyes.

Good Heavens! Was she dreaming, or was this young man indeed the "double" of whom Tom Smith had spoken?

. . . . . .

"You will take some tea, Miss O'Brien?"

"Thank you, yes," said the girl somewhat unsteadily, as she took the proffered cup. She looked again at the clean-shaven, clear-cut face. The likeness irritated and bewildered her.

"I—haven't you—I mean, haven't we met somewhere before, Mr. Rivers?" she stammered.

He looked calmly at her, and seemed to give the subject due and careful consideration.

"Really, I—I almost fancy we have," he said at length. "But, for the life of me, I can't exactly recall. Ah, that cloak"—he broke off abruptly—"of course, now I know. It was at Euston. Don't you remember? When we were waiting for the Irish mail."

"So it was," said Kate, apparently immensely relieved. "And—are you staying here?" she asked somewhat anxiously.

"I am," he said gravely, "with my aunt." He indicated the lady in the green dress, with the brogue. "The Aunt Judy I went to meet that morning," he explained.

"Oh," said Kate. "Yes, of course, you told me. How odd it seems that you should both be here."

"Oh, the world's very small," said the young fellow genially, and keeping his mirthful eyes strenuously away from the beautiful puzzled girl's face, that seemed hardly satisfied yet with his explanation.

"Very small," he added emphatically. "Why, I shouldn't have been surprised if I had met you at the Great Pyramid,—or—or on the top of Lebanon—or—some place like that, after leaving you at Euston.

Those are just the things that are always happening. But here, do have some cake or something, Miss O'Brien. You must be tired after your long journey."

He bustled about, bringing various delicacies from the tea-table to the low cane lounge where the girl had seated herself.

A few women looked enviously at her. They could not have dared face an assemblage of people" fresh from a long journey, without some "touch up," some judicious quarter of an hour's retirement; but here was this girl, neither dusty nor untidy, her beautiful burnished hair faultless in its massive coils, her face with its clear skin and faint rose-flush a "thing of beauty," and a triumph of nature over art, for once.

She threw back her cloak—the gobelin-blue cloak that had won Tom Rivers' admiration at their first meeting, and assisted his memory at their second.

"I—I am surprised you remember me," he said, as he glanced at the beautiful face; "of course, I recognised you by—your cloak."

"Do men remember dress so well?" she asked. "I thought they never knew what a woman had on."

"Oh, I always remember," he said. "Besides," he added, as an afterthought, "you forget I had a long time to study that cloak before we spoke to each other."

"And so your aunt is staying here also," said Kate, ignoring the allusion to that first interview.

"Yes, we came yesterday. We're only going to stay a week in this 'brilliant circle,' as the society

papers say." His voice betrayed regret that the visit was to be so short a one.

"Do you know Sir Wilfred—very well?" asked Kate, glancing at that vapid youth, who was lounging against the mantel-shelf and listening to her father.

The young fellow's eyes followed hers. "He is a great friend of mine," he said gravely. "I assure you he's no end of a good fellow—when you know him."

"And how long a time does it require to do—that?" asked Kate innocently.

"Of course that would depend on the mood he was in. After dinner and a bottle or two of champagne, he's very companionable, quite affectingly so. At other times he's inclined to be a little—reserved."

"Would you call his present mood a reserved one?" the girl asked, glancing at the wandering eyes, and pale face, and expression of imbecile helplessness that the youth in discussion presented.

"No; far from it," he answered quickly. "But he is not doing himself justice. There are persons who require a congenial atmosphere before they can breathe freely. Now, Wilfred is not quite happy in society——"

"I should imagine not," said Kate, still observant of the said Wilfred's uneasy air and vapid, expressionless face. "Has he any special tastes?" she asked abruptly.

Tom Rivers glanced quickly, almost disapprovingly, at her. "Is she really going to join in the

running," he thought uneasily. "I thought she was so different to most girls."

"I believe he has a few," he said quietly. "He likes comic songs, I know. One young lady has brought a banjo with her, and sings for his delectation every night. You know that song that's making such a rage in town, 'If you love me, wink your eye.' She really gives it most creditably, almost as well as the celebrated 'Comique' who introduced it at the Trocadero. But doubtless you will have an opportunity of judging for yourself," he added, taking the empty tea-cup from her hand.

"What else besides comic songs?" asked Kate.

"Well, really," the young man answered after a long pause, "I cannot call to mind anything else that specially deserves mention. I would find it much easier to describe what he does *not* like," he added, "if you desire to draw up a programme on the 'what to say, do, and avoid' principle. For instance, he does *not* like books, he does *not* read poetry, he does *not* appreciate the opera. He thinks the Academy 'rot,' and most of the theatres 'slow.' He goes to sleep over classical music; he can't hunt, and he never shot a decent bag of game even at a 'battue;' he likes his conversation done for him, so that his mental powers are under no greater strain than a simple negative or affirmative induces. He smokes, and doesn't object to any girl joining him in a cigarette. He accepts his mother's devotion with placid indifference, and thinks he's conferring an inestimable favour upon her by some brief appearance at her house parties.

He's dreadfully afraid she'll marry him to somebody, and, well—I really think that's all."

"You have drawn him very charitably, considering you are his friend," said Kate, coldly.

She did not like this young man; she thought him too cool, too cynical, too flippant; and surely it was not quite nice to speak as he spoke of Sir Wilfred.

"Being his friend enables me to do so," the young man answered in the same cool, nonchalant manner. "I assure you, Miss O'Brien, he is absorbingly interesting, if you get used to him."

"That, I suppose," said Kate, "is merely a matter of time."

"Merely, as you say, a matter of time. He is looking over in this direction. Ah, I see your father is bringing him to you. Shall I give up my place and you may commence the 'study of a young man of the *fin de siècle*,' without further delay?"

"Oh," said Kate, impatiently, "why do you use that word?—I am so sick of it!"

"I beg your pardon, but it is really appropriate."

"Might it not apply to others as well as Sir Wilfred Jocelyn? Are his tastes and manners and habits so very different from those of his associates and friends?"

The young man smiled. "I suppose not," he said. "We are all very much alike."

His countenance was quite impassive, his tone ironical and cool. Neither face nor voice betrayed anything, but seemed to have been trained to the exclusion of any expression inconsistent with good manners.

"Of course," he added abruptly, "you must have had many opportunities of judging us in society."

Kate shook her head. "On the contrary," she said, "I have had very few. I—I am not fond of society."

"What a loss for that institution," he said.

The speech was conventional and displeased her. She rose abruptly and took up her travelling cloak.

"I must ask Lady Jocelyn to let me go to my room," she said. "I—I am rather tired."

"Poor Sir Wilfred, he has been stopped *en route*," said her companion sympathizingly. "It is the banjo young lady, Miss O'Brien. We are all consumed with wonder as to whether she will carry off the prize; you see she is so naïvely innocent, and so obliging in her directions, because he has a—a slight affection of the eyelids, and if he only follows the advice of that lady——"

"You are too bad," interrupted Kate, half laughing, for really the young baronet presented quite a lamentable picture of helplessness and distress. "I don't believe you know the meaning of friendship. It certainly should not shower ridicule and contempt on the person who claims to be a friend."

"Shouldn't it?" said the young fellow, coolly. "Believe me, it does exactly the same now for its worth and meaning as it did when Sheridan wrote his 'School for Scandal.' Human nature never differs: we set it amidst different scenes and surroundings, but the real thing is always there, always the same at bottom. Life is only a series of variations on a very old and very worn-out theme."

CHAPTER X.

ANTAGONISM.

KATE descended to the drawing-room with unusual trepidation. The idea of meeting "all those women," of standing under the fire of criticising eyes in her simple home-made gown, was not an idea that inspired her with confidence.

It was all very well for her glass to show her those fair tints of red and white, that burnished hair, and graceful *svelte* young figure, outlined so exquisitely by soft folds of daffodil satin, but the mirror was not feminine and antagonistic.

She knew she was looked upon as a rival by the ambitious matrons and daughters, to whom Croft represented a matrimonial hunting-ground. The little she had seen of society had taught her how shallow a thing is its politeness, how sharp a moral frost its atmosphere can develop for an outsider.

"But why should I care, after all?" she reflected, as she took her way down the broad and richly carpeted staircase. "I shall not interfere with their plans. Sir Wilfred is even worse than I anticipated."

She would have been surprised had she known that the genial young baronet had put in an appearance at his mother's dressing-room door, and after

hinting more plainly than politely that she should dismiss her maid, had unburdened his mind as follows:

"Look here, Mater! I'm not going to be put off with any of your confounded old frumps and dowagers to-night. Hang etiquette!—I want to enjoy myself like other fellahs.—Why the deuce shouldn't I?"

"My dear boy!" exclaimed Lady Jocelyn.

"Oh, hang it all, I know what you're going to say," interrupted the "dear boy." "But I mean to have my own way; and so I tell you I'm going to take that new gal in to dinner to-night. She's a doosid fine gal, and seems to have no nonsense about her. So I just dropped in to tell you, don't yer know; and if you go bringing up any one else, hanged if I don't leave the room and go back to town. So there's the straight tip; you may take it or not."

"My dearest Wilfred, of course you may take Miss O'Brien in, if you specially desire it," said his mother soothingly. "It's not exactly etiquette, but I'll strain a point for this once, and you shall have your way. I am very pleased you like her," she added. "But really you mustn't flatter her with too much attention, for I—I rather fancy that she is engaged—or partly engaged, to some one in Ireland."

Lady Jocelyn told the "white lie" quite easily and unconcernedly, as if assured of its truth. But she knew well that nothing would so inflame her son's erratic fancy as the fear of being unable to win this girl if he so desired. And Lady Jocelyn was

quite content that he should win her if he had elected to do so. At least it would relieve her mind from its perpetual dread of one day finding herself presented with a daughter-in-law drawn from the front rank of the ballet, or the "starry" firmament of music-hall fame.

Kate O'Brien was well born, beautiful, and of unexceptionable manners. She would do credit to her son's establishment, and steer him through the shoals of social difficulties. True, she was poor and quite unknown to society as represented by the "smart" set to which she herself belonged, but once married and presented, that difficulty would be set at rest, and the seal of fashion would do all that remained to be done for her success.

However, it would not do to let Sir Wilfred see that she was pleased, or be ready too welcome his choice. She gave in to-night, under protest, but resolved that the next day she would exert her ingenuity to invent a few difficulties and obstacles, so that the weak youth should once in his life be forced to make some exertion to win favours, that as a rule, were too readily granted to be of any value.

Sir Wilfred went downstairs radiant and hopeful, and pleased with the idea that he was going to cut out that "d——d Brewery fellah" as he called Tom Rivers, not to mention the Irish rival in the background.

As luck would have it, Kate was alone in the drawing-room when her host and hostess entered. Lady Jocelyn paid her a graceful compliment on her

toilette, while Sir Wilfred contented himself with a prolonged and vacuous stare that enumerated to his own mind all her "points," as he termed them, and further increased his infatuation. Lady Jocelyn informed her that there was to be a dance the following night, and also that they were getting up the inevitable "private theatricals."

"I hope you will help us," she said. "Your father tells me you have quite a genius for acting."

"I'm afraid he exaggerates my talent," said the girl laughing. "I am certainly very fond of it, and it is no trouble to commit a part to memory, but that is a long way from being a 'genius."

"Awh, by Jove, but I'm shaw you are, quite shaw you are," burst out Sir Wilfred with a sudden enthusiasm that surprised himself. "You—awh—you look it, don't yer know. By Jove, you do."

"Haven't you learnt, Sir Wilfred, that you should never judge persons by their looks?"

"Awh— yes—by Jove," ejaculated the fascinated baronet. "But women, don't yer know, they're different—looks go for everything—present company not excepted," he added brilliantly, as he threw what he deemed an expressive glance at the calm, queenly girl.

She was surveying him with a merciless criticism that would have seriously discomposed any one less hardened by conceit and a long career of obsequious flattery.

"You are very good to say so," she said, with a little scornful curl of her beautiful lips. "If many men think as you do, that looks convey character

and 'go for everything,' it accounts for many of the foolish things they do and say."

The young baronet looked somewhat bewildered. He was not used to being disagreed with, and utterly unqualified to carry on a prolonged conversation.

"Chaff" he could understand, also the light and easy badinage of his music-hall friends, but Kate was totally different. Her last speech quite "finished" him, to use his own expression, uttered in confidence to his own bosom. He was so exhausted indeed by the effort he had made to be agreeable, that he contented himself now with watching the clock, and wishing he could slip out and ask the butler for a glass of sherry and bitters before dinner was announced. However, the room was filling rapidly, and he had to prepare himself to take Kate in to that ceremony unnerved as he was.

The effort of presenting his arm and murmuring "Pleasaw, to take you—Miss O'Brien?" still further taxed his exhausted energies, so that he was quite incapable of making any further remark while the soup and fish were under discussion.

Kate was also somewhat silent. She was perfectly aware of the indignant glances and satirical whispers of which she was the subject, but none of these affected her so much as the surprised look and sarcastic smile that Tom Rivers had bestowed on her as she marched to that much coveted place of honour beside her host, leaning on his arm.

"How dare he look like that? What can it matter to him?" she thought indignantly; and thereupon

turned to Sir Wilfred, and did her best to encourage him conversationally, though she inwardly acknowledged it was the hardest task she had ever set herself.

As for Sir Wilfred, the effects of the dinner and the wine gradually restored his courage, and he became quite boisterously brilliant as the meal proceeded, making jokes and laughing at them, and paying Kate such extremely open compliments that she grew quite uncomfortable. At the end of the table, hilarity reigned supreme, for Cornelius O'Brien and Miss Judy Rivers were firing off jokes and repartee with a keen zest and an appreciation of each other's power of humour that were quite infectious. Kate felt that her surroundings were especially dull and heavy by comparison, and again and again her eyes would wander to a certain fair cropped head which showed itself between a screen of flowers and rose-shaded candles. What a bright, merry laugh he had, and what a pleasant voice! Its tones and phrases occasionally touched her memory with that sense of recognition, that puzzled effort at identification that she had felt on first meeting him. "If I could put my bailiff into evening dress and set him down here, he would be just another Tom Rivers," she thought. "The likeness is most extraordinary."

The dinner went on through its wearisome length of courses. Kate felt bored to death and could scarcely help showing it. She inwardly breathed a hope that Sir Wilfred would not take her in another night. How eagerly she waited for Lady Jocelyn's signal, which, as it happened, cut short a brilliant

anecdote of that lady's son concerning an "A1 little filly," which he had backed and which played the mean trick of coming in last instead of first at Doncaster, to his great discomfiture and loss.

Kate neither heard nor wished to hear anything further respecting the animal, and rose with an alacrity which quite confounded her eloquent companion.

She was almost the last to leave the dining-room, and the line of rustling silks and the erect and stiffly dignified "backs" looked quite ominous as she followed in their wake.

She was most distinctly under the ban of "disapproval." She had gone in to dinner and been looked at with special favour by the owner of $15,000 a year. She, a penniless nobody. Such a fault was quite inexcusable, and an unexpressed but understood decision to "put her down" was unanimously arrived at by her feminine foes. What had all these bejewelled dowagers brought their daughters here for but to "catch" this desirable baronet, and for what purpose had these innocent and guileless maidens donned their best frocks and "tied their tresses" and bared their milk-white shoulders if not to captivate and win this same eligible individual? And here was this outsider—this girl from the "Wilds of Ireland," as they termed her birthplace—here was she actually scattering all their schemes like chaff before the wind and threatening to carry off their feeble-minded prey before their very eyes.

Once in the drawing-room Kate was decidedly "cut" by the group, young and old, who flocked

round the fire like brilliant plumaged birds, leaving her to look at albums and books as she pleased.

Lady Jocelyn noticed this, and it amused her.

"How foolish they are to show their jealousy! It will only put the girl on her mettle," she thought.

She sat down beside Kate and began to talk to her. As the conversation invariably tended to her son's perfections and good qualities, it did not specially interest her companion, who had formed her own opinion of the young man, and was not to be converted to another. Presently the group round the fire broke up into twos and threes.

The young lady with a talent for the banjo produced that delectable instrument, and proceeded to "strum" upon it with more zeal than proficiency.

Some of the others were discussing toilettes for the dance the next evening. The plumpest of the dowagers settled themselves into chairs capacious and comfortable enough for their portly frames, and proceeded to discuss the latest town scandal with gusto, and—additions; the latter gleaned from private correspondence.

Miss Rivers, or, as every one called her, "Miss Judy," suddenly pounced upon a seat close to Kate and Lady Jocelyn, and dispensing with the ceremony of introduction, began to talk to her across the placid stream of Lady Jocelyn's murmured platitudes.

"Your father and I have discovered we're compatriots, Miss O'Brien," she said, in her genial ringing tones; "so I'm not going to be under compliment to anybody for an introduction. He tells me you've not been to Ireland since you were a child."

"That is so," said Kate. "He will never take me when he goes."

"Ah, now, that's too bad of him," said Miss Judy. "Indeed, I told him so. Isn't it enough, I said, for England to take our country and dictate our politics, but is she to have our beauties also? I told him he must bring you over for the Dublin season. It's a shame to be keeping you from your own people so long."

Kate smiled at the worthy lady's enthusiasm.

"I fancy my father isn't particularly fond of Ireland," she said. "At least he never goes there unless he is obliged."

"Ah, now, is that true? He was telling me about some troubles with his tenantry. But we're all used to that, my dear Miss O'Brien. Sure, it just keeps us alive."

"Not always," said Kate. "It is very distressing to read of the murders and outrages so constantly occurring."

"Ah, well," said Miss Judy, "I'm thankful to say my property's safe and sound enough. I'm the owner of Rivers' Brewery, you know. And a fine place it is, and no need to worry over tenants and rents *there*. I only wish I could make my nephew take an aqual interest in it," she added, lapsing into brogue as she grew warm with her subject. "It's a splendid consarn, Miss O'Brien, and he'll come into it all one day, for I've no chick of my own to leave it to, and he's always been a fayvourite of mine ever since he was a little chap in knickerbockers who used to hide me caps and play thricks with me

spectacles. But there," she added resignedly, "you can't force a person to care for a thing if his mind's set against it. Perhaps when it's all his own he'll be as proud of it as I am myself."

Lady Jocelyn had glided away before this, and Kate, evidently finding it pleasanter to listen to the rhapsodies of an adoring aunt than those of an adoring mother, gently encouraged Miss Judy to tell her as much about her nephew as she wished.

She heard a great deal about his youth, his wonderful achievements at college, his generosity, his quixotic enterprises, his views regarding his fellow-man, his democratic tendencies (which his aunt tearfully lamented), the risks he had run at socialistic meetings which he attended only to "set the men right on main points," so he said—how he was a favourite in Society, and yet treated that important institution with the coolest indifference —how he was always trying "experiments" and putting himself into difficult and uncomfortable situations in order to discover for himself what wrongs were endured by the poor and middle classes, for whom he intended to legislate one day when he had "collected his own materials." All this and much more Miss Judy poured out into the ears of a singularly sympathetic listener, and there is no knowing how much longer she might not have gone on but for the entrance of the gentlemen.

Sir Wilfred, slightly unsteady of gait and watery of eye, gazed vacantly round the room in search of his enslaver.

However, the "banjo" young lady was not to be

routed this time: she flew to his side with that charming air of girlishness and innocence for which she was renowned.

"Naughty Sir Wilfred," she pouted. "You've quite deserted me to-day, and I've learnt a new song expressly for you. . . . Come along, you must hear it. It's too deliciously funny—it really is."

Sir Wilfred was neither physically nor intellectually capable of offering any resistance at this stage of the evening's amusements. He therefore gave up his arm and himself to the fair syren and was drawn pianowards, and seated on a convenient ottoman from which it was quite impossible to escape.

Kate looked on at these manœuvres with silent amusement. She was hidden from the baronet's watery gaze by the broad shoulders and wandering figures of several of the male guests, and was listening keenly for the musical treat of which she had heard.

Suddenly some one dropped into the chair by her side, and she heard a voice say, "You seem to be enjoying yourself immensely, Miss O'Brien?"

CHAPTER XI.

"THAT GIRL."

KATE glanced at her companion, marvelling a little how he had discovered her retreat.

"I am," she said in answer to his observation. "I think it is very amusing to watch people and try and read their characters. The onlooker sees so many little signs of self-betrayal of which the actors are unaware."

"The actors in this little comedy here are very easily detected," said Tom Rivers. "But I'm afraid they've met a formidable rival. I never saw the little baronet show such a decided intention to 'follow his own lead' as he has done to-night. You found him all that your fancy and my description painted him, I suppose."

"Oh, much more," said Kate, with enthusiasm. "You did not do him justice at all. He really was most entertaining."

"So I imagined," said her companion gravely. "He looked it. What a power of virtue—and other charms lives in a title."

"You speak as if you were envious of titles," said the girl gravely.

"Far from it. If there is one thing for which I thank Providence it is that I was born a commoner.

The working class will be the peerage of the future, by which term I mean the class who have brains and use them, and are judged by what they achieve, not by what they inherit. Poor effete aristocracy! Can one look without pity on its degeneration, on the pale-faced feeble dude, whose highest ambition is to *fête* actresses and ballet girls, to back horses or run off with some other man's wife, who is perpetually 'up a tree,' and sacrifices his ancestral acres to the money-lenders, who has lost all the feudal virtues of his race, and only lives to disgrace the 'grand old order' with every year of shameful sloth and self-indulgence?"

He spoke warmly, and Kate looked at him with surprise. She was a great believer in the advantages of birth, and held exalted ideas of the chivalrous graces and virtues of "blue blood."

He laughed at her grave and wondering eyes.

"You don't believe me, I see," he said, "or perhaps you think the heir to a brewery can scarcely be a judge of the heirs of aristocrats and lordlings. Yet I assure you I am not speaking without knowledge or authority, and I am not envious, and therefore looking at what I describe through jaundiced glasses. What men do for themselves and for their fellow-men is alone their patent of worth. By their actions only should they be judged, not by that mere accident of birth which places them on what they consider an elevation of superiority."

"Would you have us all equal then?" said Kate and then blushed at the foolishness of the question,

"I think," he said gravely, "that you know as

well as I do, that is impossible; men will never be equal, because there will always be the stronger physique, just as there is the stronger brain. You can't make a weak body into a giant's frame, nor can you give a stupid or ill-balanced brain genius. Therefore the superiority of physical strength and mental power will be always upheld. But they are the tools with which men should work. They would not sap the strength of manhood as the wanton waste of riches is allowed to do, nor turn the gifts of genius into sordid and useless channels. A man of great gifts is almost always eager to use them for the advantage of others. What he feels to be worth giving he gives freely and spontaneously. The merely rich man only uses his wealth to dazzle the eyes, excite the envy, and arouse the emulation of other rich men. Do you suppose society requires or enjoys the prodigal waste lavished upon its entertainments? Of course not. If you have a thousand a day you can only eat one dinner. If you possess fifty different gowns you must limit yourself to a single choice at a time. I often think we have lost the art of entertaining agreeably, because now everything is done for show, and no one expects or pretends any enjoyment in it. The simpler our tastes, the more real pleasure we get out of life."

"You must have given the subject a great deal of consideration," said Kate, who was now deeply interested in the enthusiastic young Radical.

"Yes, I have," he said frankly. "Some day I hope to be in a position to advocate my views for the benefit of my fellow-men. Otherwise," and he laughed, "what will be the use of the Brewery."

"Perhaps," said Kate, "you may find your Brewery has done a great deal of harm. Drink is the curse of Europe. Without it there would be fewer crimes, less poverty, and greater content. There would be no wars because the people would not have their maddened brains incited, or their fierce passions roused by a fiend who is never content without the tax of human lives. There would be more enjoyment of rational amusements, because their minds would be in a rational condition. And——"

"And, in short," interrupted Tom Rivers, "if you and I, Miss O'Brien, could form a league to rationalise the young aristocracy and abolish all the drink palaces in Great Britain, we should revolutionise the whole nation. What a glorious scheme!"

"It would indeed be 'Great' Britain then," said Kate sadly. "But, oh, what is the use of talking? It has all been said before over and over again. One can moralise for ever. One can see all sorts of faults and criticise legal errors and misrule, but what can one do really to make things better?"

"That is a problem I am trying to solve," said Tom Rivers. "It is not an easy one, and necessitates a study of all sorts and conditions of life, men and manners. But," he added. lapsing into his old manner again, "I live in hope, Miss O'Brien, and that is a great thing."

"Ah, now, Tom," said a voice beside them, "have I found you at last? Has he been bothering you with his politics, Miss O'Brien? 'Tis hard work to stop his tongue once he begins. If he inherited nothing else from the 'Ould Country' which he's

always abusing and ridiculing, he inherited the power of talking. And its not such a bad thing, let me tell you."

"Not for a man, Aunt Judy," said her nephew, gravely. "But a terribly bad gift for the other sex to possess."

"Well, it's stood us in good part many a time. But it wouldn't be you if you weren't poking your fun at the woman-kind. I assure you, Miss O'Brien, he never has a good word to say of any one of them. And the trouble I've taken to introduce him to the most beautiful girls in Ireland—not to mention widows—enough to entice the heart out of any man, young or old."

"I acknowledge it, aunt," said the young man, humbly. "The syrens who haunted Ulysses weren't in it with those daughters of Erin. I can only regret my inability to please them, and you. I think there must be something mentally wrong about me."

"Oh, indeed, you pleased them well enough," said Miss Judy. "It's yourself I mean. Surely you don't mean to wait until Venus herself comes down from the clouds to propose to you?"

"I haven't the least intention of doing so," laughed the obdurate youth, "even supposing that mythological goddess did still take the trouble of visiting the earth. Besides, I'm sure she wouldn't be my style at all. She was rather a flighty personage, if we are to read her history aright."

"Oh, faith, there's no pleasing you, and you'll be left out in the cold one day, and as miserable and lonely as myself," sighed Miss Judy. "Wasn't I for

ever sending my suitors away because they didn't please me, and then the day came when there were no more."

"Surely you do yourself an injustice, my fair aunt," murmured Tom, gently.

Kate looked at the brown "front," the green silk dress, the profusion of lace flounces and trimmings which made up the costume of this amiable spinster, and smiled involuntarily.

"Well, I'll not be saying I mightn't have a chance still," answered Miss Judy, tossing her head and glancing complacently at her beautifully shaped hands. "But all the same, Tom, I don't want to wrong you by leaving my property to any one else. I've always told you that, and with all your teasing ways you've not been a bad nephew—that I will say."

"My dear aunt, all this cannot be very interesting to Miss O'Brien," remonstrated Tom. "Even with her inherited tolerance of Irish peculiarities, I doubt if she thinks that knowing a person, and knowing also all that person's private history, are one and the same thing."

"Oh, Miss O'Brien and I understand each other, Tom," answered his aunt. "We had a long talk together while you gentlemen were over your wine in the dining-room."

"Then of course she knows all about the brewery," said her nephew. "Next time you pay a visit to Ireland, Miss O'Brien, you must go to Riversford and view this monument to the wealth and fame of 'Rivers Entire.' With your views on the universal

abolition of 'Bitter,' not to mention Double and Single 'X' it will doubtless afford you the keenest delight."

"Oh, sure now, Miss O'Brien, you mustn't vex yourself about such things at all. The people will have their drink, take my word for it. It's like many other bad things in this bad world. They've got used to it, and you can't eradicate a habit any more than you can a weed—pluck it from one place, 'twill come up in another."

"Well, as Miss O'Brien has been already initiated into the uses and abuses of the Family Brewery, may I ask why you have sought her again, most worthy of aunts?"

"Ah, cease joking, Tom. 'Tis but a poor, witless popinjay Miss O'Brien will think you. I came to give you a message from Lady Jocelyn."

"You've been a long time delivering it," said her nephew. "What is it?"

"Something about the thayatricals, or the costumes. Would you give her your opinion?"

"My opinion," said the young man, lazily, leaning back in his chair. "Oh, she's had that, long ago. It is embodied in a portion of the church service, for those of riper years. 'From emulation, strife and envy, good Lord deliver us.' The three evils in that petition mean, in society parlance—simply private theatricals."

Kate laughed, but Miss Judy looked somewhat puzzled.

"Now get up, Tom, and go to her," she said, coaxingly. "You know you're the life and soul of

the whole thing. It's Sir Wilfred's part that's puzzling them. He wants to act with Miss O'Brien, but Lady Jocelyn thinks of having a little two-character piece for her. Mr. O'Brien says she's done it before."

"'His Friend and Hers,'" said Kate, quietly, "I suppose they mean that. Do you know it, Mr. Rivers?"

"I've seen it," he said, laconically. He was thinking in his own mind how he would like to act it with her, and wondering whether the egotism and conceit of Sir Wilfred would rise to the occasion. He did not consider him capable of learning a part. But of course if he chose to do so, nothing remained to be said.

"Perhaps I had better go and see what they want," he said at last, with a reluctant glance at the cosy retreat and its graceful occupant. "Are you going to be a fixture here all the evening, Miss O'Brien, or will you join that lively group around the banjo?"

"I—I fancy there is no room for me there," said Kate, glancing at the fluttering skirts and waving fans.

"Did they give you that hint?" said the young man, frowning slightly. "Never mind, Aunt Judy will force the barricade; you're quite lost here."

He did not say how well content he had been to find her in that forlorn condition, or that his natural unselfishness alone prompted him to draw her within speaking or "looking" distance of himself, since he must once more resume active service.

Aunt Judy at once professed herself ready to accompany Kate to the select circle who were doing their best to make "a discord of sweet sounds" for Sir Wilfred's edification, so the trio walked slowly across the long drawing-room, watched by many critical, and not a few envious eyes.

"That girl is determined to hunt down one or other of the 'eligibles,'" said Lady Carnegie to her friend and toady, Miss Medway. "As soon as Sir Wilfred shook her off, she seized upon young Rivers. It's quite disgraceful to see girls going on like that."

"She has no mother, I believe," said Miss Medway, whose tastes were "horsey," and whose claims to feminine beauty rested merely on an eminently Roman nose, and a complexion of brick-dust hue which was so natural that no one ever envied or criticised it.

"No; that dreadful noisy Irishman is her father. I can't understand why Lady Jocelyn asks such people here. And the idea of letting Sir Wilfred take that girl in to dinner!"

Kate had already earned the distinction—whether enviable or not—of being called "that girl." It is, I believe, a sort of brevet rank given by feminine spite to any one of whom it disapproves. It means all—or nothing; it disdains definition, and is only barbed by bitterness. It cannot be held responsible in the court of slander for anything it has conveyed or suggested, because it avoids any adjective of an uncomplimentary nature; but it is strangely efficacious in branding its subject as a black sheep

all the same. This particular black sheep moved on to the exclusive and forbidden pastures so jealously guarded, quite unconscious of her brand. She was rather amused than otherwise at the various expressions on the faces of that group, and much more amused at the sort of flutter of skirts that strove to hedge poor Sir Wilfred more securely from her baneful influence.

A fashionable crowd is almost always an irritable and restless thing. All desire to see everything, hear everything, and abuse everything at once. One can only wonder why people with charming houses and every possible comfort around them will persist in filling small houses with a set of persons who are not in the least grateful for the invitation, who regard every detail and arrangement with hostile criticism, who agree with each other, the moment the "house-party" breaks up, that everything was ill-managed, dull and "boring" to a degree.

Kate O'Brien had not yet arrived at this stage of social enjoyment: she only looked on with inward amusement and outward indifference, and wondered whether it was quite good breeding for these mothers and daughters to show so plainly that the one and main object of their presence here was the capture of this weak-minded baronet.

Lady Jocelyn advanced the moment she caught sight of young Rivers.

"At last," she said. "I was afraid your aunt had forgotten my message."

"No, it reached me in course of time," he answered. "But what is wrong now, Lady Jocelyn? The play

was decided upon, the parts were arranged, and the dresses chosen. We only needed the important detail of rehearsals."

Lady Jocelyn laughed. "How satirical you are! The last point is just the difficulty. You were appointed stage manager. Why don't you look after your company? Not a single rehearsal yet and the time is drawing near."

"They all assured me three rehearsals would be sufficient, as it was so much better to study their parts privately and thoroughly," answered Tom.

Lady Jocelyn looked doubtfully. "Ah," she said, "I know what *that* means. However, I must trust to you and Miss O'Brien to pull us through."

"Oh, please do not count upon me," said Kate quickly. "I assure you I would rather not take a part; and if the piece has been arranged and rehearsed, a new actor in it would only upset the others."

"Miss O'Brien and I are going to perform a Duologue," said Tom Rivers coolly—"a *lever du rideau.* We are both modest people, and leave the four-act comedy to more important, or—ambitious actors."

"But, indeed," interposed Kate, somewhat indignant at this cool usurpation of her consent, "I never agreed to anything of the sort."

"That makes no difference, you see," said the young man; "because, in the first place, you are too good-natured to refuse to help Lady Jocelyn in her efforts to entertain her country neighbours; in the second, you know the piece and can act it admirably; and in the next . . . well, I beg it as a particular favour, for I have grave doubts of ever carrying

the comedy through, and we must give the people something——"

"What are you all talking about," demanded Sir Wilfred, suddenly breaking through the chain of detention and facing them, flushed and eager. "Awh—Miss O'Brien, here you are again. Where have you hidden yourself like the—the—violet wasn't it some poet fellah talks about——"

"Woodbine, I think," murmured Tom Rivers gently.

"Well, awh—by Jove—it don't matter about the name. Did you—awh—hear Miss Cissy Danvers sing her banjo song? No? . . . Awh—you missed a treat—by Jove you did. Didn't she, Rivers?"

"I fear so," answered that young man gravely. "It is not given to every young lady to charm our senses with such exquisite ditties as those Miss Danvers selects. May I ask was it 'If you love me wink your eye,' or that other no less quaint and delightful composition, 'Oh, no—I never——'"

"Oh, we've had 'em all," said the young baronet, enthusiastically, "and a new one—I forget the name—you must ask Miss Cissy. But now, Rivers, I say, what about the theatricals? The Mater says I'll never get through. She heard me my part in her dressing-room—but I assure you if I'm prompted at the right moment it'll be all right. It will, indeed."

"That is satisfactory," said Tom, with an appearance of intense relief. "Only it leaves one doubtful contingency, Sir Wilfred; supposing you were prompted at the—wrong moment?"

"Awh—no chaff, now. I'll be all right. I'm quite

keen on it—really I am—and with Miss O'Brien's assistance——"

"Oh, pray, don't count on me, Sir Wilfred," exclaimed Kate, "I am not going to play in the comedy at all."

"Not—awh, by Jove, now, that's too bad," said Sir Wilfred, dismally. "Oh, that can't be allowed —no—really, don't yer know."

"But, my dear Sir Wilfred, all the parts were taken before Miss O'Brien appeared on the scene," said the mother of the banjo young lady, icily.

"Awh—no—really—were they now?" murmured the distraught youth, gazing mournfully from one face to another. "Awh, but look here now," he added, with a brilliant flash of inspiration, "couldn't —awh—somebody—you know, write in a part for her?"

CHAPTER XII.

"WHY CAN'T I SAY—YES?"

"WHAT a difference!" said Kate, with a little sigh of content.

She was sitting before the fire in her own room, gazing thoughtfully into the flames, and mentally contrasting the ease and luxury of her present surroundings with those of the past week. "No creditors worrying, no piecing and patching of 'ways and means,' no bills, no duns, no—men in possession!"

She coloured softly as she murmured those last words. "He was an extraordinary young man," she said to herself, "and the likeness between Mr. Rivers and himself is wonderful. On the whole I think he was better looking . . . if less amusing. Tom Rivers is such a cool and self-possessed young man, clever too, I should say. I do like a man with an object in life, and who is determined to work for and achieve it. I remember"—and a little smile hovered over the pretty lips—"I remember a girl once telling me that her ideal man was one who had 'passed examinations.' I wonder if my ideal man is one who can work, and means to do it."

She leant back in the low cushioned chair, crossing her hands behind her head, while the unbound hair

rippled in a burnished mass round her slight and girlish figure.

She looked so lovely that it was quite a pity no one was there to admire the picture. Her face had grown grave again. She was thinking how many enemies she seemed to have made in this brief time; how spiteful the women, young and old, were. She was thinking, too, with inward annoyance, of her father's growing influence over Sir Wilfred, and of the unconcealed infatuation of that vapid youth for herself.

"It is all so stupid and so odious!" she cried, impatiently, "just like being the heroine of a 'penny dreadful,' where the poor and ill-dressed heroine always wins the rich lord, though she has nothing but her youth and poverty and home-made dresses to recommend her. But I don't want to win Sir Wilfred. I perfectly loathe him . . . only what a chance to throw away—and I thought—once—I would jump at it. . . . I wonder what has changed me?"

Again the soft colour wavered over her cheeks; she sighed, and shook back the heavy hair with a sudden impatience.

"Wealth is all very well, but it wouldn't content me. And it must be terrible to be tied to a man you despise and dislike. How could I help despising Sir Wilfred? I should have despised him just the same if I hadn't met some one so—so very different."

A knock at the door disturbed her reflections at this juncture. She rose and crossed the room to open it.

"May I come in for a few moments' chat?" said Lady Jocelyn's voice.

"Oh, certainly," Kate answered readily. She was a little surprised, but Lady Jocelyn had been particularly kind and attentive to her, and she supposed this visit was only on some matter respecting the forthcoming theatricals.

"I'm so glad you weren't in bed," said the elder lady as she came over to the fire and took another easy-chair. "One gets so little time to oneself," she added, "and so little time to talk to any one one cares for. Even my poor Wilfred complains he scarcely ever gets ten minutes alone with me."

"You must find this perpetual entertaining very fatiguing," said Kate sympathetically.

"Indeed I do, my dear. And I get no pity, though I work like a slave. I really do. People are so discontented and so hard to please. Really society wants to be treated like a Royal Personage, and have one's house list and dinner list submitted to it for selection. It doesn't matter how much trouble I take, there is always somebody who doesn't want to meet some other somebody, and makes it altogether disagreeable on that account, as if," she added plaintively, "I can keep count of the feuds and jealousies and squabbles that have gone on through the season. Why, I assure you my dear, I've asked women to my house parties who have been the dearest of friends and perfectly inseparable for a whole season, only to find that they weren't on speaking terms when they met in the winter."

Kate laughed. "But why do you ask people at

all?" she said. "If they don't amuse you and are only a trouble, why not keep your house to yourself, or—say two or three particular friends whom you can depend on?"

Lady Jocelyn looked at her with mild surprise. "How could I?" she asked plaintively. "Why, all sorts of things would be said. That I was in debt, or had taken to drinking, or that my son had done something disgraceful. Society is so very exacting, you see. It is all very well to say, 'Why do we do this, or that?' but we really must; we are compelled to do what others do, or—or be thought *tête montée*, if we don't. No one really enjoys it, but we are like sheep and must follow our leader. I have tried to be a little independent, to vary the routine, so to speak, but I am sure people don't like me any the better."

Again she sighed as she looked into the flames. "Of course," she resumed, "I would live more quietly if my son were married, But until that event takes place, I must, for his sake, keep up with all that goes on in the world."

Kate was silent. She had heard so often of the sacrifices made for Sir Wilfred, and the eagerness with which a respectable daughter-in-law was coveted by Lady Jocelyn.

"I think," that lady went on, "indeed I am almost sure, that he has at last decided upon some one who might make him happy . . . and," with an arch glance at Kate, "make me so also. Fortunately my son's choice is not one that would be biased by —worldly considerations. I have always bade him please himself so long as birth and good breeding

were present. Beauty I know he would desire, and sometimes I have trembled over the difficulties of such a combination. It is a singular piece of good fortune, therefore, that our choice should be mutual."

"It certainly is," said Kate quietly. "I suppose Miss Cissy Danvers is the young lady who is so fortunate as to please Sir Wilfred?"

"Oh, dear, no," exclaimed Lady Jocelyn in surprise. "He has never thought of her seriously. Never, I assure you. She is very amusing and . . . and piquante, and all that, but *she* is not at all the sort of girl my son would choose for a wife—not at all."

"I—I really thought he cared about her," said Kate, not a little embarrassed by the meaning glance with which Lady Jocelyn emphasised that personal pronoun.

"You are quite mistaken then, my dear. I suppose I must not say more at present, for Wilfred will plead his cause in his own way, and—besides, I am keeping you from your beauty-sleep. We all have a busy day before us to-morrow," she added with a sigh. "By the way, Kate, I haven't told you of a little surprise I have in store for the people. I heard from Mr. Rivers (who has really been of the greatest service to me throughout) that there is a celebrated thought-reader or wizard, or something of that sort in London who has been making quite a sensation there, and he offered to engage him for the evening if I wished. Now if there is one thing people seem to enjoy, it is being told by some mysterious outsider everything in their lives that they are already perfectly well ac-

quainted with. It's very odd, but so it is—and the wonder never seems to lose its charm. This wizard can do all this, besides adding a little dash of prophecy to his other accomplishments. So I at once accepted Mr. Rivers' suggestion, and after the theatricals are over he has arranged a complete surprise for the people. I myself hardly know how it is to be done, but I feel quite safe in his hands. I have told no one but you about it, not even Wilfred."

"I shall respect your confidence, Lady Jocelyn," said Kate laughing. "And I think the scheme promises well, even if the wizard is not very wonderful—a guess here and there—a random shot—a skilful hint would be quite enough to convince people of his magic powers."

"Yes, I am sure of that. And I hope it will all go off well," said Lady Jocelyn—as if the proceeding were a sort of pyrotechnic display. "And now I really must run away, I hope"—she bent forward and kissed the girl on her soft flushed cheek—"I hope, my dear—that to-morrow night we shall have something to mutually congratulate each other about."

. . . . . .

"What did she mean? Is that odious little man going to propose to-morrow?" thought Kate when she was once more left alone. "I hope not; it will make things generally uncomfortable, I'm afraid. . . And yet the very reason for which I came here was to captivate him—to get my father out of his debts and troubles by making a brilliant marriage, and I have won my point without the least difficulty. I've

only to say 'Yes,' and *heigh, presto,* all the old miserable drudging life vanishes for ever, and I shall be able to play the grand lady to my heart's content! Why can't I say 'Yes'? Why does it suddenly seem so difficult? I can't afford to pick and choose, and eligible suitors don't offer themselves every day to beggar maidens. Oh—" and a sigh, deep and bitter, burst suddenly forth—"what a miserable thing it is to be a woman, and see one's whole vocation in life only bounded by that thorny hedge of matrimony!"

. . . . . .

The next morning Kate woke bright and fresh, and with the feeling that all the troubles and worries of the past night had but a shadowy existence.

There was more than usual animation about the "house party." They had at least a definite object to-day for their minds to dwell upon. The morning was spent by the members of the comedy company in active rehearsal.

Kate and Tom Rivers had only half-an-hour before afternoon tea to run through their little duologue, but both of them felt it would be a success in spite of the hostile criticism it was likely to arouse.

She did not question him about the Wizard, though she felt strongly inclined to do so, and he mentioned nothing about that mysterious personage.

"How admirably you act," said the obdurate youth, as they finished rehearsing. "One feels sorry that Art has lost a disciple so promising."

"I wish I had been able to get a genuine opinion about my acting," said Kate earnestly. "It is all

very well for one's friends to say it is good—but they are prejudiced in one's favour."

"You will be able to judge to-night who are prejudiced in your favour," said Tom. "I think there are some here who do not love you, Miss O'Brien."

Kate laughed. "That," she said, "is very evident. But do you not think it would be possible to please them in an independent character?"

"If the Independent Character delivers those sharp little speeches with as much point of force to-night as she did a few moments ago, I scarcely think she will win more favour than Miss O'Brien has done."

"It is a humiliating confession," said Kate, looking at the young man with her beautiful candid eyes. "But I am never popular with women. I wonder why?"

Tom laughed softly. "Ask your glass, not me," he said. "It will tell you how much they have to forgive. And, as a rule, forgiveness of their own sex is not a feminine virtue, though to ours they show a praiseworthy forbearance."

"I dislike compliments, Mr. Rivers," said Kate haughtily, "and surely no sensible woman would take the credit of her looks to herself. It is such a pure accident, and to nature alone belongs the praise. We do not blame a woman because she has red hair or a hump. Why should we blame her if she has a straight nose, or a good pair of eyes, or a complexion that is independent of artificial aid?"

"I have not looked at the matter in that light before," said the young man meekly. "But as you say, why should you, or rather your sex (which I

believe is the subject of discussion), blame the straight nose and the unartificial complexion? No man would be so ungrateful."

"You will never be serious," said Kate, laughing. "But I assure you I mean what I say."

"And so do I," Tom answered with sudden gravity. "And if I could express half my gratitude for the sight of one piece of nature's handiwork—but no—life wouldn't be long enough."

With this ambiguous speech he announced that rehearsal was over and that his duties as master of the ceremonies called him away.

Kate sat there alone for some time longer, her cheek resting on her hand, her eyes dreamy and absorbed.

"I wish I knew what he meant—what he thinks," she said petulantly; "one moment he seems to be laughing at one, and the next he is profoundly serious. He is the strangest young man I ever met. I think he could influence people. I think, too, he could be a popular leader, there is so much quiet power about him—and so much common sense."

Then she rose and went quietly away to her own room to rest for the fatigues of the evening.

CHAPTER XIII.

A SUCCESS.

THE great ball-room at Croft had been turned into a temporary theatre. It was filled now from end to end with a crowd of fashion, rank and notoriety, such as Lady Jocelyn could always gather round her.

All her country neighbours were there to criticise, or admire, or envy the style in which everything was done. They did not care for private theatricals, nor expect any amusement, but they came all the same. Kate looked rather nervously at the crowd, as she took her place on one of the chairs. The comedy was to be performed first. Then followed her little piece with Tom Rivers. Sir Wilfred had been greatly incensed by her refusal to take any part in the first piece, and had declared he would throw up his own in consequence —a proceeding which would not have materially affected the play, although the laments and entreaties of the rest of the company seemed to convey that it would do so most seriously.

Considering the disputes, the throwing up of parts, the scanty rehearsals, and the general incompetency of every one associated with the performance, Kate only anticipated a perfect *fiasco.* But the consummate conceit of the amateur is a thing which sensible folk can but behold and marvel at. No doubt the

next best thing to being a success is to be perfectly convinced you cannot be a failure, and therefore, on this principle, there was every hope that the Comedy Company would win innumerable laurels.

Lady Jocelyn was not in the least nervous. She knew her "people," and she knew that the theatricals were as good as any other excuse to enable them to crowd together and criticise each other's gowns and jewels, and gaze at the "smart set" from London, and the few lions of art and literature, and wander about through the spacious reception-rooms, and discuss the decorations and the supper.

Kate sat by Miss Judy, who was gorgeously attired in purple velvet, and wore a head-dress, where a bird of paradise fluttered in a bed of diamonds and rubies. She was radiant, excited, and amused Kate not a little by a description of her own theatrical efforts in days of yore, which appeared to consist in having played in the "Maritana" with some officers stationed at Cork at that time.

"I was always partial to the theatre, and I'm sure 'tis from me my nephew inherits his talents," she said. "Whenever he stayed with me, we would be going every night to see plays or operas, and upon my word, Miss O'Brien, dear, there's not a character, nor a part, that Tom couldn't take once he saw it. But he is a clever boy, small doubt of it. I'm only sorry his talents are so universal. If a person does many things well, he'll never take the trouble to do one thing excellently."

This was a piece of wisdom that Kate had not expected from Miss Judy, but her admiration of that

worthy spinster's brilliance was cut short by her adding, confidentially, "It's not myself that said that though. 'Twas a sentence out of a play or a book, I can't remember which, but 'tis very true for all that."

Kate agreed that it was, and then resumed her former occupation of watching the guests, who were now being ushered into their seats with a celerity and an absence of all confusion that spoke well for the management.

The curtain drew up about half an hour after the appointed time, merely as an illustration of amateur indifference to any such trifle as punctuality. The aid of professional scene-shifters had set the stage in a highly creditable manner, and the realism afforded to the first act by the introduction of real brandies and sodas and cigarettes carried it through most brilliantly. If one of the characters was at a loss for a word, or felt a thrill of nervousness, or became conscious that his "part" had suddenly faded into blankness, he covered his confusion or his helplessness by saying—"Well, give me a light, old chappie," or, "Have a brandy and soda, old man?" and the audience murmured that it really was "wonderfully natural,"—as no doubt it was—because it had nothing to do with the play.

Kate's appreciation was so intense as to be almost hysterical, especially when Sir Wilfred appeared and looked hopelessly "floored" by the applause that greeted his first speech, which consisted of a sentence something under six words. But, as Tom Rivers explained afterwards, "it wasn't so much the words as

the way they were spoken which was so wonderful."

And upon reflection Kate quite agreed with him —for no one appeared to have heard the words at all.

Still, the first act was stumbled through somehow, and the long wait necessitated by change of scene and dresses seemed really all too short for the numbers of things that people had to say about the performance. At least it was quite difficult to stay the buzz of tongues when the signal for the curtain to rise was again heard.

Act II. left the audience in a blissful state of wonder as to "what it was all about;" for, with the exception of Tom Rivers and Cissy Danvers, every one had forgotten their parts, because they had all agreed that the third act was the thing after all, and so had devoted themselves to making that go off brilliantly and left No. II. to take care of itself, which it did.

However, the curtain fell at last, and the comedy concluded, and the various actors and actresses were called out with a hearty indifference to any special merit or success, which was eminently gratifying.

Then Kate slipped away and went behind the scenes to "make up." She was not obliged to change her dress. The "gowlden gown" which Biddy had so admired served her admirably. All nervousness and apprehension had passed away by this time. An audience so easily pleased and so charmingly uncritical was not likely to frighten her.

When the curtain drew up on "His Friend and Hers," she was alone on the stage in the character of a newly-engaged maiden awaiting her lover. Both the maiden and her *fiancé* had a special friend,

and the little piece was simply a discussion between them on the merits of these friends—a discussion which grew so spirited that it ended in a violent quarrel. After the quarrel the feminine friend was discovered to have played a very treacherous part to her faithful champion, and the male one to have been equally guilty towards his *fidus Achates*, in some small matter connected with "backing a bill." Mutual disgust at the worthlessness and instability of friendship once more reconciled the lovers and left them rejoicing at the prospect of matrimonal bliss which no friend of either sex should disturb, unless by mutual agreement.

The little trifle was so brightly written and sparkled with so many witty speeches, such sly hits at society crazes, and such brilliant satires upon women's faults and men's weaknesses, that it was received with unbounded enthusiasm. The two performers had thrown themselves into their respective parts with an intelligence and love for their characters that could not fail to make those characters lifelike and delightful.

Even the house party, who still looked so disdainfully at Kate as "that girl," almost forgot how objectionable she was as they laughed over the wit and merriment of the representation. Lady Jocelyn was delighted, and the enthusiasm and applause of Miss Judy threatened to dislodge the bird of paradise.

Behind the scenes the two actors stood for a moment as the curtain fell for the last time. Kate was trembling with excitement. Her eyes, larger and more brilliant than usual by reason of the artificial

colouring in her cheeks, turned to her companion. The obdurate youth was looking at her, not critically, or with the cool observance for which he was famed, but rather with a humble and deprecating gaze as of one who desires more than he dares to ask.

"I told you," he said, "that you would be a success. Are you not pleased?"

"If I said 'Yes,' you would only say that it was because my vanity was gratified," she answered. "Besides, the success depended as much on you as on myself."

"There are some triumphs," murmured the young man, "that we are selfish enough to appreciate only for our own sakes. There are others which would never be worth thinking of but for the memory that they were mutual. It is for that fact I feel grateful to-night."

He held out his hand and she placed hers, slim, warm, white, within it. He stooped and kissed it, silently as one who accepts a favour.

Then he turned away abruptly and she hurried off to her dressing-room, trembling, flushed, a little wondering, a little afraid.

CHAPTER XIV.

WHAT THE WIZARD TOLD AND FORETOLD.

WHEN the acting was over the audience broke up into groups, and then it was that Lady Jocelyn whispered here and there of the wonderful fortune-teller who was to entertain them by his faculty of divination.

The more sedate members of the party sauntered into the card-room, or listened to the music in the long drawing-room, or paid visits to the refreshment tables as a preparation for supper. The curious and the youthful section were all eagerness to hear what fate had in store, or had already done for them.

Kate found herself drifting along with the crowd when she left her dressing-room, and finally confronted by a turnstile behind which stood a tall, white-browed individual wearing a high cap on which mystic signs were woven, and who handed a white ticket engraved with black cabalistic signs to each person who wished to interview the wizard.

The audiences given seemed very brief, and judging by the angry, flushed or disagreeable faces that left the mystic chamber, they were not exactly agreeable.

Kate had not long to wait before her turn arrived, and she found herself in a small apartment hung all

round with black, and lighted only by a dull red glow which fell from above, though neither lamp nor candle was visible.

Seated before a small table, also covered with black, and on which some cards were scattered, was a strange-looking figure. A long white beard fell to its waist and long white hair flowed from beneath the black skull-cap. The face was dark and swarthy, and the eyes flashed keenly from beneath heavy brows that were dark and thick, in strange contrast to the white locks.

Kate surveyed the individual with some astonishment. He maintained strict silence, as if waiting to be addressed. At last the silence grew so embarrassing that she said hesitatingly, "Are you really able to foretell events?"

The seer stroked his long beard and answered enigmatically: "Of the Future who shall be sure, seeing that to-day knows nothing of to-morrow. Yet all may ask, though none may believe. But the Past—that to me is clear. On the palm of every inquirer I read the history of what has been.—Do you wish me to read yours, O maiden from Erin's shores?"

Now Kate had always prided herself on being absolutely free from the slightest accent that could betray her nationality, so she was somewhat startled at this remark. Involuntarily she held out her hand and watched the swarthy face and strange brows that were bent so attentively over it.

"Trouble is here; trouble greater and heavier than one so young should know," said the wizard solemnly. "Debts and difficulty, anxious days, sleep-

less nights. But they will pass. . . . Be patient. A cross rests on the heart line. You will love, maiden, but pride will step between you and your lover. You think him beneath you in station, but love cares not for rank or gold, or anything in life save just its own mysterious fate. Would you gain rank and riches? They are at your feet. Yet beware, for your heart still speaks, though you would fain be deaf to its pleading. He whom you despise is more worthy than he who awaits your choice. Be true to yourself if you desire happiness. Fate will not always be unkind. You have courage, and you shall have fortune and happiness, but only if you are true to yourself."

Kate had listened in silence too astonished for words.

How could this man know of that strange little episode in her life . . . of that half-wondering half-tender and wholly humiliating interest—nothing more than interest—which she had felt for the youth who had called himself Tom Smith. She blushed scarlet as she thought of it, and snatched away her hand somewhat indignantly.

"Be not offended, maiden," said the wizard, gently and rebukingly. "Surely you know that the Fate that rules all lives works by strange means, and oft-times through strange channels. Aye, strange as that which has made one Christmas-Eve in your life a memory you may blame, but which you cannot forget. Say, is it not so?"

Again the hot blood rushed to the girl's face.

"Why ask me, seeing that you can read so much for yourself?" she said faintly; "yet I would like

you to answer me one question, if it be your power. Was he of whom you speak only what he pretended to be?"

"You ask me of another's life. Now I may not read it, unless I read it as I have read yours. This only I can see—there is no shame attached to your interest in his welfare; nor, be it ever so hopeless, or so mad,—or so misjudged, need you blush to own it to yourself."

"You speak strangely," said Kate, "and you speak of what I myself am hardly conscious of. If I say it is false, that the lines you have read have not told a true story——"

"You still would only attest what your heart will one day deny," the wizard answered; and with a gesture of his hand he seemed to announce that the audience was over.

Kate left the chamber of mystery, feeling strangely perplexed and annoyed; conscious too of an inward sense of indignation that any second person could have pretended to know her better than she knew herself. Of course it was all nonsense, and of course she did not believe in palmistry or thought-reading any more than any other enlightened person believed in it; but all the same she felt curiously uncomfortable. She was also conscious of a disinclination to face Tom Rivers, and be questioned by him as to what the mysterious prophet had said to her.

She took refuge in the drawing-room, and made a pretence of listening to the noisy and unmelodious rhapsody, which a long-haired foreign pianist, with a distinguished reputation and a name some-

thing under six syllables, was thundering forth from the Brinsmead Grand. "What a desecration of the instrument!" thought Kate. People, however, were talking animatedly, and eagerly under cover of the noise. Suddenly, without warning, there came a pause, then a soft shower of rippling notes followed by a plaintive *sostenuto* melody. The player and the instrument had evidently come to an understanding, and the result was delightful, but not favourable to the conversationalists. Presently the music ceased and there was a movement towards the supper-room. Kate had promised to go into supper with Tom Rivers, but he was nowhere to be seen.

However, she saw Sir Wilfred's face peering round the door as if in search of some one. The moment he saw Kate he advanced eagerly towards her.

"Awh, looking everywhere for you, Miss O'Brien. Too bad to hide yourself like this. Determined to take you into supper, don't yer know, and here you are."

"I really don't want any supper," said Kate coldly.

The little baronet's face fell. "Awh, too bad—you can't mean it. Awh, by Jove, you won't be so cruel —and after waiting all the evening for the—the pleasaw," he ejaculated distressfully.

"Surely, Sir Wilfred," said the girl with an impatience and petulancy that she made no attempt to disguise — "surely there are others of your mother's guests on whom you should bestow this honour. You are strangely forgetful of your duties as a host."

"Yaas, ya-as, by Jove, I am; I know it. But it's all your fault. 'Pon my honour, I assure you. All your fault. I—I never can think of anybody else now when you're by, Miss O'Brien. I'm sure you know it, though you're so—awh—so cruel. I asked your father if you really disliked me, or if I had any chance, and he assured me you—awh, were quite favourable in your views—and I might—in fact hope. Oh, Miss O'Brien, Kate—beautiful, divine Kate, say I may. I—I—in fact, I worship you—'pon my honour, worship is not half strong enough to express my feelings."

"Oh, please say no more," exclaimed Kate. "You do me a great honour, Sir Wilfred, but really I—I don't care in the least for you, and I am very sorry that you should have said this."

Sir Wilfred's face fell. "Of course you don't care. I—awh—I could not expect that so soon. But in time, and—awh—really, you know, I'd do anything for you. Anything in the world, and my mother's so fond of you," he added.

The people had all left the drawing-room. Kate, embarrassed and annoyed at this sudden proposal, was meditating flight as her only means of escape when suddenly Tom Rivers appeared in the doorway. She saw him start; she noted also the quick glance he gave at the two embarrassed faces. Then he turned sharply away, leaving Kate once more alone with her unwelcome suitor.

"Come, Sir Wilfred," she said cheerfully. "Let us forget all this and be friends. I assure you you've made a mistake in thinking I should make you happy. I—I couldn't do anything of the sort. I'm not a—a

nice girl, really,—not companionable or easily contented, or anything of that sort, and I've a dreadful temper. All Irish people have, you know. Now try and forget that you ever took this fancy into your head. There are so many girls nicer, cleverer, better suited to you in every way than I am, who would be only too proud and happy to be your wife."

Sir Wilfred burst forth into frenzied protest. "Never, never was there such another girl. Never could he forget her. Never could he care for any one again. Life—fortune—all he had was at her disposal if only she would accept it. But Kate was gently inexorable, and, to end the argument, she took his arm, and led him into the supper-room, where she advised lobster salad and champagne as a restorative. The poor little baronet was undoubtedly very miserable, though he took her advice as regarded the supper, and ministered to her own requirements with a solemn devotion that was worthy of a funeral ceremony. In vain Kate tried to cheer him. The poor little man was "hard hit" for once in his life, and even the "flowing bowl" possessed little attraction under the circumstances. His grief was too deep to be easily drowned, even by champagne.

"I'll never believe in magic or—or witchcraft again," he murmured plaintively, as he filled his glass for the third time. "I went to consult this wizard fellow, as they call him, and I asked him if I would be successful in my suit, and he assured me I would. At least it was on the paper he handed me, for he didn't speak."

He pulled a card out of his pocket, and handed it to

Kate, sighing mournfully the while. She glanced at words—

"You either don't deserve or feare youre fate, if to-night you do not winne that on which your heart is sette."

As she looke[illegible]at the bold, clear handwriting, Kate's face grew suddenly warm.

"Did you say the wizard gave you this?" she asked quickly.

"Yaas—why—awh—how astonished you look! Of course he gave it—wrote it before my eyes."

"You saw him—write it?"

"Upon my honour, yaas, and I thought I'd try my fate as directed. . . . And see how it has turned out," he added mournfully.

Kate had recovered her usual composure, to all appearances.

"I—I suppose you wouldn't let me keep this?" she asked gently.

"Keep it. Of course. Only too—too honoured. Keep it, and anything—everything that I have with it if you wish," burst forth the little baronet excitedly.

"Hush, Sir Wilfred," murmured the girl, alarmed at the notice his loud voice and enthusiasm had attracted. "I think we have decided all that, but I should like to keep this card if you really have no objection."

Sir Wilfred again protested that he could have no objection to bestowing all his worldly possessions on her if she so desired, or would so far condescend as to accept them.

She intimated, however, that this card was at present all she needed, and endeavoured to induce him to leave the supper-room. This was a work of some difficulty, for Sir Wilfred, having secured a small table in a convenient corner, was in no hurry to put an end to the *tête-à-tête*.

His mind was so full of his rejection that he felt impelled to return to it again and again, with a view, apparently, of assuring himself that it was true. A few more glasses of champagne seemed to throw a glamour of hope around the subject, and he became maudlin, persuasive, tearful by turns, until Kate grew almost desperate.

She could not escape, as she was hemmed in by the table and by the baronet himself, who sat opposite to her. She felt certain that their prolonged and rather public *tête-à-tête* had been severely commented upon, and was annoyed at her own folly in bringing it about.

Added to this was a growing sense of irritation and annoyance at the discovery she had made.

Finally she rose, unable to bear Sir Wilfred's maudlin speeches any longer.

"Please take me out of this room," she said. "I am tired and—and faint. Besides, we have monopolised this table too long already."

Sir Wilfred made a feeble effort to rise, but his intention exceeded his powers of execution. He sank back with lack-lustre eyes, and resumed his maudlin murmurs of admiration.

Kate was seriously annoyed.

"You must let me pass, Sir Wilfred," she said with heightened colour.

"Can I be of any assistance?" said a voice beside her.

She glanced up and saw the tall figure of Tom Rivers. In the momentary relief and gratitude for his presence, she forgot her suspicions and hailed him gladly as a friend in need.

"I want to get away from here, Mr. Rivers," she said hurriedly. "But I cannot persuade Sir Wilfred to let me pass."

"Come, Sir Wilfred, you are detaining Miss O'Brien," said Tom, laying his hand on the young baronet's shoulder.

Now, whether it was from his disappointment, or the champagne he had imbibed, or the unusual excitement of the evening, Sir Wilfred was by this time in that state of obstinate dulness and ill-humour which is the most trying stage of inebriation.

The touch and voice of Tom Rivers acted like match to gunpowder. He shook off his hand and staggered to his feet.

"What the d—l business of yours ish it what Miss O'Brien wishes?" he shouted wrathfully. "You go back to Ireland—and at-t-tend to your d—d brewery. I'm not going to be—be interfered with;" and seizing his champagne glass from the table, he dashed the contents full in the young man's face!

CHAPTER XV.

A QUARREL.

In a moment the supper-room was a scene of confusion. Women screamed and men rushed forward. Kate alone stood white and calm, though her breath came quickly as she surveyed the prostrate baronet. Tom Rivers had simply knocked him down like a feeble ninepin.

The blow and the shock seemed to have completely sobered him, for when he was assisted to a chair he kept on murmuring apologies and explanations, and assuring the frightened women who crowded round him that it was all right and all his fault, and that Rivers was a "doosid plucky fellow." All of which information did not throw much light on the cause of the quarrel.

As for Tom, he wiped his face and shirt-front, and then pushing the table aside said in a low voice, "Now, Miss O'Brien, come away from here." Kate was only too thankful to leave the scene of confusion, and took her young champion's arm just as Lady Jocelyn and Cornelius O'Brien appeared in the doorway of the supper-room.

"I'm sorry I lost my temper," said Tom quietly, as they walked along. "I ought to have remembered

the little fool was drunk and didn't know what he was doing."

"I'm not sorry you—forgot," said Kate softly. She was a woman, and had Irish blood in her veins, and rather appreciated the "sledge-hammer" argument which had answered Sir Wilfred's insolence. "But I shall never be forgiven now," she added. "What will they all say of me?"

"I hardly think that will matter to you," said her champion. "Or to me either. I leave to-morrow, you know."

"Do you?" said Kate, with a little odd sinking at her heart. "I'm sure we shall all miss you very much."

"You will all be very candidly spiteful about me when my back is turned," he said, laughing. "That is the usual thing. Lady Jocelyn even won't stand my friend after my knocking over her adored simpleton. By the way, what had put him into such a murderous frame of mind, Miss O'Brien?"

"I think," Kate said very quietly, "you are better able to answer that question than I am."

"You flatter me. . . . I am quite ignorant of any reason."

"Come in here and sit down," said the girl suddenly as they passed the open library door. "I—I want to speak to you for a moment."

Something strangely like nervousness or fear changed the usual imperturbable face of the obdurate youth. Had his sins found him out? Were they to be roughly and mercilessly visited upon him by this fair avenger?

He said no word, but simply followed her into the deserted room, and meekly took the chair which she pointed out to him.

Then Kate took from her dress the card which Sir Wilfred had shown her and placed it on the table before his eyes.

"Can you answer the question—now?" she said.

His eyes flashed from that little piece of circumstantial evidence to the pale face and stately figure of the girl who stood there before him.

"I—I will not attempt to misunderstand you," he said humbly. "I did play that soothsayer and I wrote that card. Do you wish to know my motives?"

"No," said Kate fiercely. The red blood flew to her cheeks and the storm signals of feminine wrath displayed themselves in quickened breath and flashing eye. "Whatever those motives were," she said passionately, "they only resulted in insult and annoyance to myself. I don't ask why you did this. I only say that it was a mean trick to play on a girl in my position. More than that, it was cowardly, it was ungentlemanly."

"Please go on," said the young man humbly. "I assure you not a word you say is undeserved. It is no excuse, of course, that I only saw what every one else saw, and I thought our Amorous Imbecile might as well put his fate to the test to-night as on any other night."

"No, it is no excuse," said Kate, now in a red-hot rage. "What business was it of yours? How dared you interfere with my concerns? My position in

this house was not so pleasant that you should seek to make it worse. Now you have added to it all this scandal, for Lady Jocelyn is not likely to forgive me. . . . And as for the other women. Well, surely you know the world well enough to know that the whole blame of this scene will fall upon my shoulders."

The young criminal only looked at her helpless and abashed, as one who knows his cause is hopeless.

"It is quite true," he said. "What I meant only to be a piece of harmless fooling has turned out a miserable tragedy."

"But this is not all," continued Kate, the inexorable. "May I ask you how you procured the information about myself which you were kind enough to repeat? Not but what half of it was pure guess-work and the other half untrue. Still, blundering and stupid as your pretended palmistry was, you must have been at some pains to get your clues and frame your guesses."

But to this the young man could answer nothing. He felt he was helplessly and hopelessly in the wrong.

Carefully as he had laid his plans, he had quite forgotten that that fatal bit of handwriting might be produced against him—quite forgotten that he had written out a few new speeches and suggestions for the duologue, and that Kate therefore was perfectly acquainted with his handwriting—and quite ignored the possibility that Sir Wilfred might be foolish enough to show his "magic card" to the last person in the house who ought to have seen it.

For an ordinarily cool, self-possessed young man who never lost his head or allowed himself to be "put out" by trifles, Tom certainly had placed himself in an extremely awkward position.

He could only account for it by the fact, that in the whole matter, of which Kate was as yet happily ignorant, he had suffered his feelings to overrule his judgment.

In all matters connected with women he had hitherto been an indifferent spectator, but he had stepped from that point of vantage once, and the step had never been retraceable. In place of his usual cool criticism of that curious workmanship of nature—a girl—he had drifted, how he knew not, into interest, sympathy, admiration, wonder, about one. He had been guilty of acts of folly for which he blushed now. He had desired to keep the character of knight and champion in the background, but by a singular piece of folly he had let in the light of discovery on the whole scheme.

He knew he was over head and ears in love with this girl, though he had never betrayed or confessed it; but now he had placed himself in such an utterly false position that any intimation of that fact would only make matters worse. What could he say? How could he justify himself? It was impossible.

So he only sat there, white and shame-faced and miserable, while Kate poured forth vials of wrath upon his head, and lashed herself into fiercer indignation by reason of his silence and acceptance of that indignation.

Every accusation stung him to the core; every

motive misinterpreted by the girl's passionate humiliation flashed before him as the mean and base thing she declared it to be; every moment his condition became more hopeless, and his misery more intense, and yet—he was silent.

Oh, wonderful patience of man! What woman could sit calmly down and hear herself lashed by the tongue of scorn and upbraided by the voice she loved the best, and yet be dumb and uncomplaining, for fifteen long minutes?

Truly the faults of this young man were many, and his follies not a few; yet, when judged by those who are wiser and better, let this quarter of an hour of patiently borne reproaches plead a little in his favour. It shall not justify him—far from it—but it may lead his judges to say, "Truly the case of this youth was exceedingly hard, but so was his punishment."

. . . . . .

"Don't you ever mean to speak? Have you nothing to say?" exclaimed Kate at last when speech and wrath were well-nigh exhausted, and the hysterical termination which threatens most feminine anger was dangerously imminent.

"I have a great deal to say," said the criminal humbly, "but I'm afraid it would be of very little use."

"I am quite convinced of that," said the young Juno witheringly, "so perhaps it is just as well you don't intend to say it. And now I will wish you good-bye, and I trust," she added cuttingly, "that the next country-house you visit will benefit as much

by your many talents as this one has had the good fortune to do."

"You are very hard on me, Miss O'Brien. If I told you the truth . . . if I said I wanted Sir Wilfred to know his fate before—I left—well, that I suppose looks just as impertinent as all the rest. Yet I assure you that was my only reason. As for what I said about yourself . . . I had learnt some of it from your father . . . and from another source. I only talked a jargon of nonsense. I never meant you to give it a serious thought."

"I haven't the slightest intention of disappointing you in *that* respect," said the girl haughtily.

"No doubt it looks impertinent—foolish. . . . Anything—everything you have said," he went on humbly, "but I think . . . I hope, you will be merciful. If you knew how ashamed I am, how I have valued your good opinion."

"You have gone a strange way to work to obtain it, I must say."

He sighed and rose from his seat and stood before her in the dim light, pale, and sad. The buzz of voices reached them. The strains of a waltz floated in weird pathetic melody from the distant ball-room.

Somehow, as Kate listened, it seemed to her that all her life long she should remember that melody and the look of that humbled pleading face from which she turned now with such cold and bitter scorn.

All her life . . . All her life . . . for how or why she knew not but that life seemed a changed and altered thing as she turned and left the room with

that silent figure standing in its midst. Standing with outstretched hand which she refused to touch as she coldly said, "Good-bye."

He watched her till the last gleam of daffodil satin passed from his sight. Then——

No, he did not sink into a chair and bury his face in his hands, he did not pace the room and mutter savagely of "cursèd Fate"—in fact, he did nothing that the conventional and proper-minded hero does who sees his hopes blighted in their "first fair promise."

He simply walked to the mantelpiece, took a cigarette, lighted it, looked slowly, steadily round the room, as if he was mentally retracing all that had passed within its walls, and then he left it.

Did he grieve, despair, or hope still? If so, he and his own heart alone knew. He was very quiet, very humble, very much ashamed of the position in which he had placed himself, but he was a young man not easily daunted, and a young man who was very determined.

CHAPTER XVI.

KATE CHANGES HER MIND.

"KATE, stop! I must have a word with you," said Cornelius O'Brien.

The girl was running along the corridor to her own room, anxious to get there unobserved. She turned as she heard her father's voice.

"It is very late," she said, "and I am very tired, but if it is important——"

"Important!" said O'Brien angrily. "I should think it was important. What the devil do you mean by acting in this foolish manner?"

He followed her into the room, and closed the door.

Kate was silent. She had gone through so much that night, that now a sense of weariness and depression alone made themselves felt. She sank down on a chair and waited for the storm to burst.

"Are you mad?" went on her father. "Didn't I bring you here on purpose to captivate this young fool? Wasn't it an understood thing you'd accept him if he proposed, and now—upon my soul, Kate, you're enough to try a saint. What do you mean by it?"

"Mean?" said the girl miserably. "Well, I only mean that bad as affairs were, the remedy looked

even worse. Surely there must be some more creditable method of extricating yourself, father, than by selling me to a drunken imbecile like Sir Wilfred."

"He is no worse than—than hundreds of other young fellows of his position and—wealth," answered Cornelius. "And he'd be certain to reform. His very love and admiration for you would have a beneficial effect upon him."

"Possibly," said Kate coldly. "But I fail to see that they would have a beneficial effect on me; only, perhaps, that is not worth thinking of."

"It is only sentiment and nonsense," said her father. "I thought you were too clever and sensible to behave like this. Upon my word, Kate, it is most trying, most exasperating. Haven't you had enough of troubles, and worries, and debts, and duns? You know I can scarcely keep a roof over you, or manage to supply the few necessaries of life for—for both of us. Not that I care for myself. I only want my club and my cutlet, and a bottle of wine in peace, and—and a little cash for contingencies at the card table; but you —well, I'm only advising you in your own interests. You're a fine girl, a pretty girl, an accomplished girl. You're a thousand times better fitted for society than any of these wooden-headed dolls here, who look down upon you. You've distanced them all without the slightest trouble You've won Sir Wilfred as easily as possible—and then you throw him over. A girl who behaves like that is only fit for a lunatic asylum."

"Perhaps you had better send me to one," said Kate indifferently.

"I can't think what's come over you at all," resumed her father. "You were quite ready to make this marriage a short time ago, and I'm sure Lady Jocelyn is as anxious for it as I am. Never did things fall in and fit in so beautifully, and yet you upset it all at the last moment by this piece of folly."

"Has Sir Wilfred told you, then?"

"Of course he did. After that scene in the supper-room. Why, it was quite affecting to see how cut up he was, and he's lent me such a damned lot of money too," he added.

"Is that so?" said Kate, lifting her tired white face to her father's clouded and angry one. "Did you borrow on the security of my accepting this proposal?"

"Of course I did. I never doubted for a moment but you would say Yes to it. Such a chance! Good Heavens! you mightn't get another in a life-time. I'm not a worldy-minded man," he went on pathetically. "I've not bullied you or bothered you. I've given you the best of everything when I had it to give, and let things drift along as best they could. I know I don't possess much practical wisdom, but I do know a good chance when I see it, and I see it now."

"I would have married him if I could," said Kate sadly. "But, oh, he is so odious. When it came to the point, I couldn't accept him. It seemed so insufferable, so degrading to give myself to such a man."

"Beggars can't be choosers," said her father gloomily. "And if you were half as sick of this life

as I am, or had known such a run of ill-luck, you'd be only too thankful to grasp at such a chance."

"Yours are only money worries," said Kate, with a sigh.

"Only! . . . Just hear the girl! *Only!* as if there were any others in the world worth caring about. Money sets everything straight, just as the want of it sets everything wrong. And look what a fix you've put me in. I borrowed the money to come here, in the faith that I'd be able to repay it when you were engaged to Sir Wilfred, and the fellow. . . .the party —I mean——"

"Father," said Kate sternly, "what do you mean? From whom did you borrow the money that paid off the bailiffs, and left us free to come here?"

"Well, if you must know—and, indeed, it has weighed very heavy on my conscience, Kate—and I never liked to tell you—it was from that young fellow who was in possession. He told me he had a legacy or something of that sort left him, and could advance me the sum on my promise to repay within three months."

"You—borrowed from him! Oh, father!"

Kate had risen to her feet. Pale, cold, ashamed, she faced him. Scorn for his weakness, and contempt for his broken faith; no new things to her, but she had never felt so utterly ashamed as she did at this moment.

"Well, it's no use to make a fuss now," said O'Brien. "After all, the young man offered it. I didn't ask him, and I've no doubt the money was of no use to

him, and he wanted a—a sort of investment. I'll give him ten per cent. interest on it."

"He is as likely to get the interest as the money," said Kate bitterly. "What was the sum altogether?"

"Oh—about fifty pounds," said O'Brien airily.

"Fifty pounds!" she echoed in surprise.

Strange as that young man had been in his ways and manners, it was stranger still to think of him as the possessor of a sum of money which he was willing to lend to such a very doubtful personage as Cornelius O'Brien. But not more strange than that he should live such an odd, uncomfortable life, or adopt such a curious profession in his leisure hours.

The more Kate thought of it, the more mysterious it seemed. But at the present moment her chief feeling was one of intense indignation.

"How could you take money from—from any one in such a position," she said. "What must he think of you?"

"That gives me very little concern," said Cornelius airily. "He is not a gentleman, and really, the condescension was on my side. Some people would have had scruples about accepting money from such a source. I—I did not wound his feelings by even pretending to think it was an unusual proceeding."

"And you say you have borrowed from Sir Wilfred also," Kate resumed sternly. "You might at least have paid off the first debt before incurring another."

"Oh, you women, when will you ever understand the absolute necessity of possessing money! I don't like borrowing; I—I would really much rather live

without increasing these perpetual obligations, but the world simply won't allow it. Somebody or something is perpetually asking me for money, and as I seldom or never have it, I am obliged to ask somebody else. There is the case in a nutshell."

"In its horrible, humiliating truth," said Kate bitterly.

"Well, put it how you please. Words do not materially affect the situation. The only point to be considered, now, is, do you mean to help me out of my difficulties? A girl's 'No' doesn't stand for much, when a man is in love with her, and Sir Wilfred has fairly lost his head over you. He'll be sure to ask you again before we go away. Won't you make up your mind to give him a different answer?"

Kate shuddered. All her former loathing and dislike returned. She could not bring herself to contemplate the position without shame and disgust. And yet what a prospect lay on the other side. Perhaps no argument her father could have used would have had the weight with her that that confession of his debt to Tom Smith had had.

There was something intolerable in the bearing such an obligation. The more she thought of it the more indignant she became. The whole memory of that life of debt and disgrace—shifts and pretence—meanness and humiliation—rolled back like a wave that swept her into the old dark stormy sea again. For a little space her feet had rested on firm ground. Her eyes had looked up to the sky and sunshine. Only for a little space. Such things were not for her. Whichever course she took would not lift the burden of

trouble from her heart, but one would materially increase it."

"Come—come," interrupted her father's voice at last. "Don't stand there looking like a tragedy queen. You're an immensely lucky girl, I think, and . . . even if Sir Wilfred is a little bit wild or . . . takes more wine than is good for him, well, that only hastens the chance of your being a rich young widow; and then—you can please yourself in your next choice, you know."

Kate only stood there still mute—still cold—still scornful.

"I—I don't want to worry you any more to-night," said O'Brien, growing uncomfortable at the prolonged silence. "Perhaps when you've slept over it you'll take a more sensible view of the matter. In any case, if Sir Wilfred should propose again will you . . . well, temporise? Hold out a little hope . . . not be too decided and that sort of thing. That's not much to ask—and, after, all, I'm your father, and you do owe me a little duty and obedience."

"I suppose so," said Kate, with that little cold smile he knew so well and hated so much. "But I think you are taxing both rather severely——"

"Well, will you think over what I've said? I really am in an awful hole. I wouldn't ask this sacrifice of you only that it is the only way out of the scrape for both of us. Some day you'll thank me for it—you really will."

"Shall I?" said the girl wearily. "It seems hardly probable."

"Well, good-night," said her father rather shame-

facedly. "You look tired and wearied: get to bed and have a good sleep, and I assure you everything will look much better to-morrow and you'll be quite willing to give Jocelyn another chance."

He kissed her forehead and left the room, rather haunted by that white sad face of her, and yet convinced that he had acted for the best.

Kate sank down in the low chair by the fire and buried her face in her hands. Seldom had she felt so utterly and entirely miserable as she felt to-night. It seemed as if everything had gone wrong. She was keenly conscious too of an intense disappointment respecting Tom Rivers. He had seemed to her so honest, so open, so straightforward. Subterfuge and meanness were the last things she could have associated with him, and yet what a discovery she had made.

He had gained possession of facts which he must have known were intensely humiliating, and these facts he had used against her—prompted by some silly vanity that seemed utterly unworthy of any man. Not content with this, he had urged Sir Wilfred on to that proposal which had ended so disgracefully. As she thought of that scene in the supper-room the blood mounted to her very brow: she blamed it all on Rivers, and she was too angry with him to be logical.

"I am really very unfortunate," she thought, as she meditated on the situation. "I was unpopular before —but what will it be now? I am sure Lady Jocelyn will be very much offended."

She began to consider her father's advice. After all

he was wiser and knew more of the world than she did. No one could live on sentiments—and debts—and that was all she had to look forward to. Did love matter so very much? Was it so absolutely necessary to adore one's husband? None of the married women she knew seemed to care two straws about their respective lords. Yet they seemed to "get on" very well. And after all she would gain a great deal, as her father had said—a great deal. She sighed heavily. There was no one in the background. Men were all alike—untrustworthy and heartless. She could see no way out of her troubles except by this marriage—and she would be candid with Sir Wilfred and tell him so—and that he must not expect any affection from her. The bargain was terribly one-sided, but if he chose to accept it . . . well, there was no more to be said. The bells might be set ringing, the orange-blossoms bought, and the curtain dropped on Kate O'Brien.

"I had better do it," she said, rising at last and looking sadly and wearily at the dying flames in the grate. "I must marry—some day—and at all events Sir Wilfred will be easy to manage. I wonder if he will give me another chance?"

She sighed again—but not for Sir Wilfred.

The slow tears welled up in her eyes as she stood looking down at the dull red ashes. Her thoughts dwelt still with passionate resentment and bitter shame on the discovery she had made respecting that unworthy youth to whom she had said good-bye not an hour before.

If he were false, he who seemed to own so brave

and candid a soul, well, who in the world of men, young or old, were worthy of trust?

None, she told herself bitterly, and if they suffered at women's hands, well, they deserved it. Sir Wilfred was a fool, and weak as wax, but after all he would be her slave, and she could rule him as she pleased.

If she had been tempted to care for—for somebody else, well, that was all over. A foolish fancy, rapid in death as in birth, for no man who cared for a girl, really cared, or honoured her, would have behaved as—well, as that somebody else had behaved.

She could never excuse, and never forgive him!

. . . . . .

There was a decided hint of social frost in the air next morning when Kate descended to the breakfast-room—frost that exhibited itself in chill glances, frigid greetings, disdainful withdrawals of skirts and finger-tips.

The girl felt annoyed and discomfited, though she showed no sign. Even Lady Jocelyn was less genial and gracious than her wont. Kate missed Miss Judy's kind face and garrulous tongue, and, though she would not confess it, missed also that courteous attention and warm greeting which she had always received from Tom Rivers. Aunt and nephew had left by the early train, and few comments were made upon their absence.

Sir Wilfred did not come down to breakfast at all, and Kate could only take refuge by her father's side, and heartily wish that their visit was near its conclusion. There seemed a general determination on the

part of the feminine guests to "Boycott" her altogether. Conversation was carried on in spasms or in low tones amongst themselves, and spiced with hints and innuendoes that she could not help hearing.

It is surprising to note how very impolite polite society can be—sometimes.

When breakfast was over they all dispersed, and Kate took herself off to the conservatories to forget her woes and console her senses. The warmth and fragrance and beauty scattered around in such lavish profusion delighted her eyes and taste. She wandered on and on among palms and roses, and delicate-hued orchids, and fragrant plants, feeling soothed and comforted as she never felt in the society of the men and women who were supposed to be making Croft enjoyable.

"It is really miserable here," the girl exclaimed suddenly. "I can't stand it any longer. I shall tell papa he must take me away. Even Biddy and Elton Street are preferable to this house and these people!"

"I—I'm awfully sorry to hear you say so. By Jove, I am," said a familiar voice, and Sir Wilfred appeared suddenly at a side door opening into the palm-house. "I've been looking everywhere for you," he continued. "I wanted to tell you—to say how sorry I am for last night. Couldn't sleep a wink, 'pon my honour, thinking of it, and of what a confounded ass I made of myself. The Mater cut up awfully rough too. Said I was a disgrace, and no decent gal would look at me—and upon my word I believe she's right. But do say you'll forgive me, Miss O'Brien, and, I promise you, I'll not offend again. I'll try and

keep straight—and knock off brandies and sodas, and—awh, bitters, and all that. I will indeed. I'd do anything for you. I can't bear to think I've made you angry."

"I'm not—angry," said Kate, who was rather amused by this flood of eloquence. "And I forgive you willingly, Sir Wilfred. Of course it was very annoying to be mixed up with a scene like that of last night, and I really feel quite ostracised by every one this morning. Still, as my visit is nearly over, it doesn't matter very much. Please say no more about it."

"You're—you're awfully good, 'pon my honour you are," cried the little baronet almost tearfully. "How I wish I wasn't such an unlucky beggar as to displease you. I can't forget you, and I can't cease to —to love you. It's no use you know. Absolutely can't be done. Oh, if I could only hope——"

Kate was silent. Her chance had come again. Her second chance. She could place her foot on the neck of her foes. She could force these arrogant, spiteful women to acknowledge her as their equal; and more, she could smooth her own pathway of trouble, she could gratify her father, she could rid herself of that obligation which alone and above all others stood out and shamed her by its generous trust. She could do so much, and win so much . . . Should she do it?

Her face paled. The hand, playing idly with some flowering plant by her side, trembled visibly.

"Sir Wilfred," she said, "I will be perfectly honest and candid with you. I don't, as I told you yesterday,

care for you in the least. My motives for accepting you, if I did accept, would only be selfish. I cannot fail to see how much I should gain, but you have to consider how much you would lose."

"Lose!" burst forth the little baronet rapturously —"lose! If you only knew how I worship, how I adore you! . . . Why, the sacrifice is all on your side, Miss O'Brien—Kate—Oh, to call you Kate! . . .Oh, do you—can you give me hope? If you only knew how miserable I've been all night. I was in two minds of cutting my throat or drowning myself in the fish pond . . . and now you're so kind . . . I ain't worthy of it . . . you're just like a goddess, and I only ask you to let me worship you!"

"And the worship is to be all on one side?" said Kate sadly. "For, I tell you plainly, I do not return your affection in the least."

"How could I expect it?" said the suitor humbly. "What am I? Do you think I don't know and don't feel ashamed? . . . At least I have since I've known you."

Kate grew more and more embarrassed. She felt she was taking an unfair advantage of a generosity she had no right to accept. Both her father and herself would turn it to their own account, and neither would make any return for it.

"It would be wrong," she said faintly. "You would blame me one day. I wish I could think I cared for you, but I can't; and yet, if you very much wish it, I will marry you."

"You will?" almost screamed Sir Wilfred; "you mean it? You're . . . you're not laughing at me?

Oh, Kate! "—He fairly broke down then, he was so overcome by his emotions.

"You must forgive me for being such a fool," the poor little man sobbed brokenly. "I—I never dreamt of such happiness. Heaps of girls have thrown themselves at my head, and would have pretended to love me just—just for the sake of my money, but you—you're so honest and so straight, and I'm sure you wouldn't deceive me in the future any more than you've done now. . . . And perhaps," he added humbly, "some day you may get to care a little—who knows! That's to say if you're sure you don't care for any one else?"

"You can rest assured of that," said Kate coldly.

Now that her fate was sealed, she felt the old sensation of disgust and contempt. It seemed as if her whole character would suffer and deteriorate. The old frank girlish candour and honesty would be replaced by hypocrisy and seared by the hot touch of shame. She could never think of herself, hope for herself, as she had thought and hoped with that Kate O'Brien whom soon the world would know as Lady Jocelyn.

But Sir Wilfred was too blissfully content to trouble about anything further. His mind had grasped two facts: one, that she would marry him—the other, that she cared for no one else. Armed with this assurance he was ready to defy Fate!

CHAPTER XVII.

POLITICS AND PEOPLE.

THE news spread rapidly and was received according to the mood, age, or station of the recipients. Some were enraged, some incredulous, most were indignant.

The fact of having to conceal their feelings, of having to receive "that girl," as the future bride of Sir Wilfred and the future mistress of Croft, was anything but pleasant.

Still, it had to be done, and when the party assembled for afternoon tea, Kate was received with gushing congratulations whose pretended warmth and sincerity in no way deceived her. She was thankful Sir Wilfred did not appear. Her situation was trying enough without his presence, though no one, looking at her calm face and self-possessed and gracious manner, could have imagined that she was not perfectly at ease and perfectly happy.

Lady Jocelyn was all tenderness and affection for her prospective daughter-in-law. She had rather dreaded the "banjo young lady," whose arts and wiles had been only too apparent. Her son's choice, however, justified that faith in his judgment and good taste which she had so fondly maintained in the face of all obstacles. Some of the dowagers were quite

incensed by what they termed her "absurd parade of satisfaction." They could not imagine what charm she could see in the penniless, haughty Irish girl that their own daughters had not possessed in a far greater degree. However, the die was cast, the race was run. The matrimonial stakes had been won by a rank "outsider," and all they could do was to pocket their wrath and pay their losses.

Kate sat there amidst the brilliant tea-gowns, and listened and smiled and replied, and all the time the hollowness of it and the stupidity of it disgusted and bored her. "When I can entertain, I will ask people with brains and minds to my house, not sawdust dolls," she thought in disgust as she listened to the shallow conventionalities, the idle gossip, or jargon of slang and stable which made up the conversation.

She could not yet understand what pleasure people could find in talking about the affairs of other people, or spicing their remarks about them with hints and suggestions and spite, that even wit could not redeem.

"Surely," she thought, with that warmth and honesty of youth which believes the world need only be told a truth to accept it—"surely it would be so easy and so pleasant to be mutual and sincere, to say kind things, not malicious ones!" But no, it seems as if society lives on deceit and cares only to deceive. Lives are consumed in an elaborate pretence at happiness, which every one knows is misery. Existence is an unending affectation, and people seem honestly afraid to show they are sorry or glad or surprised or grateful for anything that happens.

"Why do you look so grave, my dear?" said Lady

Jocelyn's voice, interrupting that somewhat dreary contemplation of her sex and its hypocrisies in which Kate was indulging.

The girl started, and flushed a little. "Was I looking grave? I was only thinking."

"I suppose of the happiness in store for you?" said Lady Westmoreland, whose two plain and portionless daughters had been brought to Croft for the very end which Kate had gained so easily.

"I do not believe in happiness," said the girl gravely, looking at the portly dowager with that calm searching gaze which the women so much disliked. "I was only thinking what life would be like if we were all perfectly honest, and perfectly frank with one another. It seems so odd, sometimes, to think how we spend our lives in pretending to be what we are not, to like what we hate, to do what we are not doing, and to cover up a tissue of mistakes by an elaborate fiction of 'Whatever is, is right.'"

"Dear me," said Lady Westmoreland, "that is just the way this new school is beginning to talk. I hope, Miss O'Brien, you are not going over to those dreadful women who call themselves 'emancipated.'"

"If admiring truth and candour in others and desiring to see it universal means being 'emancipated,' then I must plead guilty," said the girl, smiling. "Surely, Lady Westmoreland, there are times in society lives, in your own life even, when you feel it would be much nicer to be frankly and honestly miserable instead of 'pretending' to be happy—when you know your sentiments and opinions are not the outcome of any genuine feeling, but rather the parrot-

repetition enforced by the codes of the world you live in —when you grow sick of pretence, and long to lay aside the armour which position bids you gird on— when life, as you honestly and clearly regard it, seems but a sickening and humiliating repetition of all that is unworthy and commonplace."

"Those sentiments," resumed the dowager, "may be all very well for our Radicals and Socialists—and such like people, but, really, Miss O'Brien, they sound very extraordinary on the lips of a young lady. But perhaps your Irish sympathies are accountable for it. I hope you are not going to turn our dear Sir Wilfred from the safe and honourable paths of conservatism. We should never forgive you."

Lady Westmoreland was a Primrose Dame, and believed that her party was the only one who had ever done or ever could do anything for the country or its political welfare. It is a fallacy which most "parties" accept as a truth; otherwise, indeed, they might grow discouraged, and the world would then suffer exceedingly.

"I assure you I shall not attempt to influence Sir Wilfred's political opinions. Indeed, I was not aware he had any," said Kate icily.

"Oh, yes, my dear," said Lady Jocelyn. "He is a true and staunch upholder of the Conservative party. I only wish he would stand himself, but I could never persuade him."

Kate smiled. She could not help it. Lady Westmoreland noted the smile, and disliked her all the more for it.

"I hope Lady Jocelyn will persuade you to join

our League," she said; "we are becoming quite a power in ourselves."

"Are you really?" said Kate, looking at her foe with unconcealed amusement. "Do you know, I always looked upon the League of the Primrose Dames as a sort of fad? Just one of those excuses for excitement which breaks the monotony of society *ennui* now and then. I never thought it could do any good. If your 'Dames' attend lectures, or deliver them, or play at people's concerts, or send vans of children to Epping Forest, I really can't see that the moral or material welfare of the populace is affected. To know their grievances you must know them, but you seem to think it is quite sufficient to let them know you—at a convenient distance."

Lady Westmoreland was both shocked and annoyed at such outspoken and advanced opinions. She hated to be contradicted, or to have her views disputed, and to think that this girl, this wild Irish hoyden, should dare to hint that she—a great and leading star of the feminine political world—could be mistaken in her mode of action was quite insufferable!

Even Lady Jocelyn looked a little alarmed, and two or three of the fair tea-drinkers laid down their cups and listened in wide-eyed astonishment to the controversy.

Kate enjoyed the sensation she had created. They had all been so insolent, so indifferent, so supercilious hitherto. It amused her now to see them turn and stare—and listen. They should learn one day that "that girl" was not the nonentity they had sup-

posed. If she had kept silence hitherto it had only been for the same reason that is supposed to actuate our "Darwin-accredited" ancestry—viz., because she "thought the more."

Once having secured attention, she launched forth on the subject of the people's wrongs with an eloquence and an assurance that astonished her hearers. She did worse than pour contempt on the "Dames" and their order. She made them appear ridiculous.

"If you dislike the odour of a sick-room," she said, "you can go about with a sprinkler of rose-water, to odorise it, but if you treat the people in a similar manner you will find that the foul air and bad drainage of their sick-chambers defy all your essences and attempts at fumigation. You play with the wrongs and miseries of your city as a child plays with a lion-cub. The child forgets that one day the talons may rend him limb from limb. And you forget that wrong has sharp talons also, and the longer the patience the greater the strength."

She rose as she finished speaking. Her face was flushed, she had grown enthusiastic, and was quite forgetful of her astonished and indignant audience. Lady Westmoreland felt that such an attack as this could not be allowed to pass unnoticed. So in her coldest and haughtiest voice she said, "Our young Irish friend has strong Radical prejudices, I perceive. But she can scarcely presume to judge of the society that rules the people and keeps it in its place. Of course caste prejudice is very strong, so we must not be too hard on her."

Kate only smiled. "I assure you," she said, "that

I have no prejudices about one form of government more than another. I only say the best rulers are those who consider the public welfare, and forget individual ambitions—for whom the words 'place' and 'party' have no meaning in comparison with honesty of purpose and a desire to fulfil the duties they have undertaken."

One or two of the great ladies exchanged glances. They had vivid recollections of pressing private interests and necessities upon their lords, and of schemes as regarded younger sons, or various male relatives who wanted a "good thing" when they had a chance of getting it. It was a great thing to be a Primrose Dame. It was a greater to be the proud dispenser of offices or sinecures with good salaries attached, and here was this ridiculous creature talking of "honesty of purpose," and the comparative unimportance of "place and party" when compared with the dirt and greed, and grasping avarice, and everlasting discontent of that Hydra-headed monster called "The People."

Of course the monster had to be humoured at times, to be stroked and petted and given sugarplums from dainty fingers, but the idea—the sublimely ridiculous and childlike idea of "considering" it for a moment, or making any individual sacrifice for it! Why, the girl must be mad.

There was a general rustle and flutter of skirts—the sign of adjournment to dressing-rooms. Lady Westmoreland tapped Kate lightly on the arm, and as she passed her, "My dear," she said, "you are young and a little headstrong and one-sided, as all youth is.

I am very sorry you have such strong opinions, as I fear you may lead poor Sir Wilfred into unsafe paths, and he—he has been such a good friend and adherent to our party. But perhaps," she added, with an indulgent smile, "when you too are allied to us, you will look upon things differently."

Kate flushed at the insinuation and the patronage. "If I know myself at all," she said proudly, "I know also that no 'Alliance,' however great or noble, could make the slightest difference in my feelings or opinions."

"I am sure of that," said Lady Jocelyn kindly. She was a little uneasy at the prospect of affairs and desirous of keeping the peace. "Come, Kate," she added, "I want a chat with you before dinner, so I'm going to carry you off to my dressing-room. Do you know," and she turned to the group of tea-gowned dames and damsels who were making a move stairwards—"do you know that Mrs. Jackson Lafaye has arrived at last? I expect her toilettes will give us something to talk about more exciting even than politics!"

"No, has she really? When did she come. Why didn't you tell us before?" cried a chorus of voices.

"She's the best dresser in London," said Lady Westmoreland, gloomily conscious that her ruby velvet dinner-gown was showing signs of "wear and tear," and that her diamonds couldn't claim comparison with those of Mrs. Jackson Lafaye, which rumour declared had once been the property of a great French empress.

"And the prettiest, at least the Prince said so,"

murmured the banjo young lady, who read her "World" and her "Modern Society" religiously, and was quite *au fait* with the ways of the *monde ou l'on s'ennuie* by means of those useful periodicals. "She will cut us all out." She sighed as she took her creamy silken skirts up the grand staircase, mentally reviewing in her own mind her various gowns, and equally certain that they would all look shabby and mean by the side of the wonderful American.

Kate said nothing. She had never even heard of Mrs. Jackson Lafaye.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A NEW GUEST.

KATE was almost the last of the house-party to enter the drawing-room that night, previous to the announcement of dinner.

There was an unusual stir and excitement in the social atmosphere. She discovered that it emanated from a small, exquisitely-dressed and wonderfully lovely person who was chattering, laughing, and amusing everybody in the circle by the wit and originality of her speeches.

Kate guessed this must be the American beauty and approached with some curiosity. Lady Jocelyn introduced her, and Mrs. Jackson Lafaye turned her brilliant eyes upon the girl with unconcealed admiration. There was no opportunity for more than a brief exchange of greetings, as the dinner bell sounded at that moment, and Sir Wilfred, proud and jubilant, bore down upon his *fiancée* to conduct her to the dining-room. She was seated opposite to the pretty vivacious American, and found it more entertaining to watch and listen to her than to talk to Sir Wilfred, who seemed heavier and more tiresome than usual.

"Who is Mrs. Jackson Lafaye?" she asked him at last. "Of course I know she's an American, but is

she rich—or a widow—or has she done anything remarkable?"

"Rich—I believe you," answered Sir Wilfred with more force than elegance. "How her husband made his money I don't know, nor any one else. He's dead now, but she's got the 'pile' as they call it, and doesn't she go the pace too! By Jove. . . . Why, she was the rage in London last season. The Prince made her a success, they say. Every one was talking of her."

"She is wonderfully lovely," said Kate admiringly.

"Think so, really? I don't—'pon my honour—can't hold a candle to you, you know. Those American women always remind me of wax dolls . . . colouring and dress, and—and all that. They've no style . . . look as if a breath of wind would blow them away. Never think they're "fixed up," as they call it, unless they're covered with jewels. Now that woman's much too over-dressed. She'd be all right for a state ball, but for a quiet party like this, downright absurd, don't yer know."

"It is a—little—too much, I think," said Kate, with a glance at the brilliant reds of Mrs. Lafaye's gown, studded and sparkling everywhere with diamonds and rubies. "But then Americans have a weakness for jewellery. At the hotels abroad I've seen them covered in diamonds at breakfast-time. I used to excuse that, though, because it might have been done for safety, not display."

"They're a doosid queer lot," remarked Sir Wilfred. "I never liked 'em. So jolly cheeky, don't yer know. Took an American gal down to supper at a ball once,

and she put a strawberry ice down my back, 'pon my honour she did. Said I wanted rousing up. I walked out and left her there. . . . Served her right. Never spoke again."

"But how did Mrs. Jackson Lafaye become celebrated?" asked Kate again.

"Oh, money did all that. She got to the Drawing-room. The Prince said a word or two. Then the toadies flocked in, and took her up. You know how it's done. Once the ball's set rolling, so jolly easy for a clever woman to keep it going. She gave balls and dinners that made every one talk. Flowers cost a thousand at one ball alone. The Mater got to know her—thought her charming. They say she's one of the few Americans who can be amusing without being vulgar. There ain't many."

"And she is a widow, you say?"

"By Jove, how interested you are in her! I thought women never cared about one another except to say spiteful things. I—I shall be quite jealous."

"I wonder you did not fall in love with her yourself," said Kate, with a faint sigh.

"I. Oh, no! No Yankees for me. Know a trick worth two of that. Leave 'em to sons of earls and dukes with nothing a year and any amount of debts. That's their sort. Besides," and he lowered his voice, and looked tenderly at his companion, "there was only one girl in the world for me. . . . Felt it directly I saw you . . . 'pon my honour I did."

Kate abruptly changed the conversation, and kept it on safe and general lines until Lady Jocelyn gave the welcome signal of departure. The moment she

entered the drawing-room Mrs. Jackson Lafaye fluttered down upon her like a brilliant bird of prey.

"I'm just dying to speak to you," she announced. "I liked you the moment I set eyes on you. Seemed to feel we'd be friends. Lady Jocelyn tells me you're engaged to her son. S'pose I ought to congratulate you. I will if you like."

"Thank you," said Kate, somewhat coldly. "But it's not at all necessary."

"Well, then, I'll leave it alone, because I know Sir Wilfred, and I don't know you—yet. I suppose you take a reasonable view of life, though?"

"I—I hardly know," said Kate, laughing at the oddity of the question.

"Because," continued Mrs. Lafaye, "if you do you'll not expect to get more out of marriage than it can give, and, let me tell you from experience, that's not much. Women are not happy, as a rule, rather the reverse. They expect too much of the sentiment of life, and there's very little of it going round this century. Will you come into the conservatory with me, and have a talk?"

"With pleasure," said Kate, and they moved off side by side, Mrs. Lafaye throwing a word here, a jest there, as she passed along the room.

"You've not many friends here, I should say," she remarked to Kate. "I could see that quick. I must say, for downright cold, cutting, insolent spite your English society women beat creation. How they get that sort of 'freeze' on them I can't imagine. Guess they're born so. It's useful, but unpleasant."

"What makes you think they don't like me?" asked Kate.

"Oh, a hundred things—looks, hints, the turn of their backs. Study a woman's back if you would read her character, Miss O'Brien. They can mask their faces, but they forget their backs."

"I never knew that before," said Kate, laughing. "But you're quite right. I'm decidedly unpopular here. But, as I leave in a couple of days, it doesn't much matter."

"Oh, do you go so soon? I'm real sorry," said the pretty American, seating herself on one of the basket chairs. "You know I came here just to please Lady Jocelyn. She's real good and kind-hearted, and I'm very fond of her. But I can't bear that Westmoreland woman," she added abruptly. "Hope she's not a friend of yours?"

"Oh, dear, no," said Kate. "I think she hates me."

"I suppose she wanted to catch Jocelyn for one of her girls. I'm glad she didn't. He's less of a fool than . . . Oh, I beg your pardon, Miss O'Brien. I forgot. . . . How stupid of me!"

"I'm not offended," said Kate.

"Well, you're very good-natured. But you see I've not much opinion of men. Specially young British men. They're too lazy, and too weak, and too fond of dissipation. They're bored to death with life before they've half-lived it. They're selfish and extravagant, because they kill out all better and purer feelings before they leave off Eton jackets. They laugh at sentiment, and say romance went out with

cavaliers and courtiers. I surmise it did, and you're all the worse for it. They drink too much, smoke too much, gamble too much. They call it 'bad form' to show any feeling, and their hates and their loves, their bills and their dishonour, are alike settled in the law courts. It's very funny—it really is."

"I suppose it must seem so," said Kate.

"Now in our country," persisted Mrs. Lafaye, "men *do* work. We don't despise energy, or sniff at new ideas, or throw obstacles in the way of invention. Certainly we're always at see-saw—one day win a pile, next day lose it. But our young men don't go sniffing after girls' money-bags and sneering at women as no better than they should be. They marry a girl, dollars or no dollars, if they love her. But here, why, any woman can buy your younger sons and your best titles if they've got a certain amount of dollars a year. I've had twenty-three proposals in six months, and all titles. Just because 'Wales,' as they call him, said a good word for me, and it got whispered about Lafaye's silver mines out in Nevada. It isn't me they care about any one of them; it's the dollars they want to finger."

"You've read the world very accurately," said Kate. "It certainly is very disappointing."

"I s'pose there are a few good fellows here and there just to keep things going," said Mrs. Lafaye. "But they're scattered about like the currants in the stuff they give the sailors on board ship. Plum-duff I think they call it. A great deal of 'duff' and very few plums. When are you going to be fixed-off? Married, I mean," she added abruptly.

"I—I don't know. I've not thought about it," said Kate, colouring softly.

"Don't be in too great a hurry," said Mrs. Lafaye, with sudden earnestness. "You're so young and so beautiful. Mind, I mean it, and no nonsense. The moment I set eyes on you I said to myself, 'That girl's real grit—all through.' I should be sorry to think you threw yourself away. Of course I've no right to say that, but—I know Sir Wilfred. Of course his mother thinks he's just an angel. . . . Well, I guess there's two sorts of them flying round."

"I'm not at all anxious to be married soon," said Kate. "But I suppose it won't rest with me."

"You mean they'll hurry you on despite yourself. But you look as if you'd got a will of your own. Take my advice, show it."

Then she rose from her seat.

"I s'pose it's not just etiquette to be sitting here," she said. "Those other woman will be speculating about us. Not that it matters what I do: they say, 'Oh, she's an American,' which is about equal to proclaiming a person a Choctaw, or a Mahatma from Thibet. You English people are real funny, except to yourselves. I guess you never even know when you're humorous, but to a stranger, and any one coming from my country (I'm a New Yorker, you know), you do seem queer."

"I've no doubt we do," said Kate, as she followed the brilliant gown and its small and dainty wearer through the aisle of palms and roses, and all the fragile scented beauty of the glass-houses. Mrs. Lafaye was quite an interesting and novel study to her,

and eminently refreshing after the stiff, cold, supercilious women who had done their best to make her feel an outsider here.

When they entered the drawing-room the men were just coming in, and her new friend was immediately surrounded. Kate stood near listening to the sparkling nonsense that fell from her lips, and almost envying her that power of repartee which made conversation resemble a juggler's set of balls. Mrs. Lafaye seemed capable of keeping any amount of such balls dancing in the air at the same time. She gave her views of England and things in England with a charming air of candour and impartiality that robbed her pretty insolence of all offence. If her observations hit home or hit hard, they were all excused by the fact of her being an American in the first place—a woman in the second.

"Work!" she said in answer to some remark of Lady Westmoreland's. "You say your princes and princesses work. My! I wish you could see our President and his wife: they'd make you sit up, I guess. Work!...Why, your Royal folks just play around, that's what they do, and draw big salaries for it too. They open a bazaar, or lay a stone, or christen a ship, or go to a flower show, or a public dinner, and have their speeches written for them, and they call that *work*. What would they say to fourteen hours a day and only £10,000 a year for it, and expenses to come out of that? That's what out President gets; and if he don't suit and don't do his duty the people soon let him know. You want something of that sort over here. You're all half asleep, seems to me, or so used

to grievances and impositions and burdens of all sorts that you don't feel them. I guess you do want waking up!"

"You should send an army of reformers like yourself to perform that office," sneered Lady Westmoreland.

Mrs. Lafaye's bright eyes "fixed" her on the spot.

"I guess it wouldn't be much use," she said. "You're too fond of hibernating. So we can only spare time to show you an example."

"But you are so frighfully energetic," said a man's voice from the background. He was a member of Parliament, and had for years distinguished himself by never opening his lips except to vote with his party. "You tear and rush and seize upon innovations, and practise all sorts of experiments. It couldn't be done here. The country wouldn't stand it."

"The country would stand it fast enough if its rulers and leaders had the pluck or the energy to try it," answered Mrs. Lafaye. "But when the Tories are in, all they want to do is to keep the Whigs out; and when the Whigs are in they just want to stay, and so, between them, nothing's done, and the country is as badly off with the one side as the other."

"Pardon me," said Lady Westmoreland severely, "but surely a democratic person coming from the very centre of Republicanism is scarcely a judge of our time-honoured and long-proved legislature."

"That's just what that person *is*," said Mrs. Lafaye, laughing. "The new eyes are quicker than the old—the young brains create while the old plod. And your country is real like an old half-paralytic

veteran, who ought to be pensioned off and yet won't confess his weakness and impotence."

"You are quite wrong, Mrs. Lafaye," said Lady Westmoreland severely. "You only speak from that light, cursory view of things which a London season affords. Politics are no caprice with us. Whether men or women we regard them seriously, and with every desire for the welfare of the country."

"If you knew the present head of the government was a fool, and that the country would benefit in every way by the other side coming in, not one of you'd have the pluck or the honesty to say so. You know you can't do any good, but you pretend you do it all the same. And it's so screamingly funny," she added maliciously, "to think of you great ladies who call yourselves 'Primrose Dames' playing the fiddle at East End concerts for working-men, or singing Italian songs out of operas to their Lordships of Gutter and Slum! Take my word for it, your primroses aren't as strong as the brambles, or as many as the weeds, and you can't smother one or the other, try as you may!"

"That, of course, is only your opinion," said Mrs. Mountjoy—another Primrose Dame. "It will not materially affect our efforts."

"No, I guess it won't; but I make you a present of it. I'm a bit of a prophet, and I can see a yard or two into the future, which to you is only a map of self-interest. England will follow the example of America before many years are over her head, and make better use of her money than keeping up the mockery of court shows."

"Can't understand why women talk politics . . . awful waste of time, don't yer know," drawled Sir Wilfred, who wanted a *tête-à-tête* with Kate, and had vainly endeavoured to draw her from Mrs. Lafaye's circle of attraction.

"It must seem so—to people like you, Sir Wilfred," answered the pretty American. "You do all the work—and we all the talk—isn't that it?"

Then Lady Jocelyn proposed music and the group broke up. Cornelius O'Brien drew Kate aside for a moment.

"Sir Wilfred's been talking to me about settlements. He's most generous. Faith, you're a lucky girl—and I'm sure you'll be happy. He wants the affair soon, and there's nothing to wait for, so far as I can see. We must get the *trousseau* on tick. That's easy enough once the people know who you're going to marry. When shall we say—two months—three?"

"Oh, no, not so soon," exclaimed Kate, turning white. "I—I must have time to think—to get used to the idea. After all, Sir Wilfred's quite a stranger."

"You'll know no more about him in a year than you do to-day," said her father. "Long engagements are a mistake."

He was terribly afraid of the proverbial "slip" between Kate's pretty lips and this rare and costly cup. He knew Kate was self-willed and self-reliant. Not a girl to be easily led or persuaded. Although, contrary to his expectations, she had changed her mind and accepted Sir Wilfred, yet she might break off the whole affair again—if the fancy seized her.

"They may be a mistake," said Kate coldly, "but scarcely so great a one as a hurried marriage."

"Well," said O'Brien good-humouredly, "I am not going to press you on the point; you and Jocelyn can arrange it between you. Only, I may as well hint that one feels one's obligations to a son-in-law less than to an expectant suitor. By the way, Kate, cultivate that little American if you get the chance—she's fabulously wealthy, and she'd be a very useful friend to you when it comes to the wedding-toggery—you understand."

"Perfectly," said Kate.

She felt hurt, ashamed, indignant. Was she never to be free from these obligations, free to cultivate a friendship that was disinterested, or claim a love that was worthy and unselfish?

It seemed very hard.

This hint of her father's frightened her. She had no desire to be hurried into this marriage. As long as it was a far-off prospect there seemed something vague and hopeful about it. Something, anything, might happen to prevent it. But if Sir Wilfred was already impatient, and if her father and Lady Jocelyn urged a speedy termination to her engagement, she felt it would be well-nigh hopeless to resist. Her father's affairs were terribly complicated. Once she was settled and "off his hands," to use the conventional phrase, he could give up the house in town and live more economically as well as comfortably. It was scarcely likely he would postpone his convenience for an indefinite time to suit her wishes.

The cloud on her brow deepened. She looked any-

thing but a proud and happy *fiancée* as she sat there in a quiet and obscure corner, hidden effectually from Sir Wilfred's sight, and meditating gloomily as to the future.

She felt like a weak swimmer struggling against an opposing tide. In a little time the swimmer would grow faint and powerless—the tide would have its way, unless——

She felt her face grow warm at the thought, was it of possible rescue, of some strong arm battling with the waves, seizing her from force of stormy waters. It may have been. She may have had some dream, vague, shadowy, yet sweet with youth and hope.

And fortunately hope is hard to kill when we are very young.

CHAPTER XIX.

"REMEMBERING THINGS THAT WERE."

"Do come into my room, Miss O'Brien," said Mrs. Lafaye after she had wished her hostess good-night. She and Kate were leaving the drawing-room together. "That's to say, if it's not inconsiderate to ask you to stay up. Are you tired?"

"Not tired enough to refuse such an invitation," said Kate, smiling.

It was impossible to resist the fascination of this bright and winning little beauty. It seemed equally impossible to think of her as a married woman, or, indeed, a woman to whom life had presented more responsibilities than a flower garden offers to a butterfly. Kate followed her into her luxuriously-appointed chamber, where her maid was in attendance to remove the jewels and costly evening toilette, which had achieved its end, if not its aim, by creating envy in feminine hearts and admiration in male minds.

When the gown had been replaced by a wrapper of pale blue cashmere and lace, in which the beauty looked even more dainty, fragile and alluring, she settled down into the deep padded chair by the fire, dismissed the maid, and announced her intention of having a "real good time."

She commenced by ticking off the various characteristics and foibles of the guests with an amount of satirical humour that amused Kate beyond measure.

She broke off at last with an apology. "You must have a great deal to think of?" she said. "And I surmise your world is considerably narrowed since your engagement. It seems to have made a sensation here. They were all full of it. How do you like the experience? Is it novel?"

"Yes," said Kate. "It can boast of that advantage. But it's rather soon to talk of it as an 'experience.' It is only a day old."

Mrs. Lafaye regarded her thoughtfully and with something almost compassionate in her brilliant eyes.

"A day. Well, it's not so bad as being married—not so bad as waking after a dream to find all your life changed for you."

"That," said Kate, "must be even a sadder experience."

"It is," said Mrs. Lafaye. "Yet I wasn't as old as you when I knew it as mine. I—I sometimes think I've never been a girl at all. That's why I like to study them, and talk to them, and hear their views on things and—people."

"People meaning—as a rule—men," said Kate.

"Exactly. It's curious how their eyes seldom wander beyond that horizon. And, after all, it's not a great or a wide one. As a rule, men are very disappointing."

"I am sure of that," said Kate. "Do not fancy my present position holds any illusion."

"Perhaps," said Mrs. Lafaye. "That's something

to be grateful for. I hardly like to ask you a question. You may think me curious or impertinent, but I should like to know—why—you are going to marry Sir Wilfred!"

Kate was silent for a moment. She felt a curious leaning to confidence, a desire to unburden her overstrained heart, but yet she shrank from putting into words the real reason of her present situation.

"I am not at all offended," she said presently, "but I can only tell you I am going to marry him to please himself, and to please my father, and—and because I suppose I shall have to marry some day, and—well, that is all, I think."

"The reasons are about as unsatisfactory as—the man," said Mrs. Lafaye frankly. "You are victimising yourself for other people. I can see that: you can resent, you can struggle, but you see in the end you must give in. I'm afraid you'll be sorry, and unhappy, too. You're made for something better."

"Oh, no," said Kate bitterly, "I'm only a poor nobody, and my father is in the happy position of most Irish landed proprietors. There's no help for it! I've gone through a liberal education in the way of debt and difficulty. I am sick to death of it all. Mere poverty is bad enough, but genteel poverty, with appearances to keep up, is ten times worse."

"My dear, I know all that. I've been through the mill myself," said the little American softly. "I did just the thing you're going to do—married to escape it."

"Did you—escape it?"

"The poverty, and shifts, and troubles, oh, yes.

But I found there were worse things to bear than these."

Her face was shadowed now. The eyes bent on the fire looked strangely sad and mournful.

"I don't know why I should tell you," she said. "I've never told any one before. But if we're to be friends—and I felt we were the moment I saw you—I may as well be frank from the beginning. You don't look like a girl who chatters, so I won't preface my story by saying 'Let it go no further.' I feel there's no need."

"You are quite right," said Kate earnestly.

"I know it. Well, I told you my experience began very early. It wasn't pleasant, it wasn't safe either, for a woman. I had married ignorantly, thoughtlessly, perhaps selfishly. I was made to feel that every one of these reasons was criminal. I was made to pay to the uttermost farthing the debt of obligation I had incurrred. I learnt how loathsome and terrible a thing a woman's bondage is, and though I might have claimed freedom, I dared not. To say I went in fear of my life is to say very little. I went in worse fear and worse peril."

For a moment she covered her face with her hands. Kate saw that she was trembling violently.

"I had only one friend, one noble single-hearted, devoted friend," she went on. "What he did, how he thought of and for me, what he saved me, even I hardly know. And this man was made the instrument of my punishment. The dark clouds that lowered so thickly over my head threatened to break over his. Then at last I knew what temptation was.

I might have broken my chains, I might have assisted myself, I might even have grasped happiness. I wonder sometimes how I resisted. There seemed so much suffering in life and I was so young, and—but I mustn't speak of it. It is all over. I did find courage. I sent him away. The one human being on all the face of the earth that I cared for, trusted, loved. Six months later I was a free woman. Death cut my chain of misery for me. Fortune was flung at my feet. The world smiled at me. But of him, my friend, I have never heard from that hour. The world seems such a small place till one wants to find one face in it. Then it is so hopelessly, pitilessly large."

"But you may meet yet," said Kate gently.

Her own eyes were dim. The quiet, unforced pathos of the story touched her more deeply than her companion imagined.

"Oh," said Mrs Lafaye presently, "I have said that to myself very often, but I begin to feel very hopeless."

Two or three tears rolled down and fell upon her clasped hands. She looked at them glittering there in the firelight. "The world thinks I am a happy woman," she said. "It envies and marvels at me. And after all I am only a woman whose heart is empty—whose very soul is sick with longing for the sound of one voice—the sight of one face. It sounds so—odd—to say it."

"No," said Kate. "It only sounds very pathetic. . . . And as you say, difficult to believe."

"Because I have so much, you mean. But that

is the worst of women. There is always that foolish thing called sentiment in the background. They hide it, cloak it, deny it, but at some time or another it will show itself, and then everything else seems poor and commonplace and of no account."

"Yes," said the girl, below her breath. "I can believe that—only sometimes one gets over it."

"You never get over it," said Mrs. Lafaye earnestly. "You only dig a grave for it, that your tears perpetually water and your thoughts perpetually open. You may forget joy, pleasure, gratification, even ambition, but you don't forget pain, because it always hurts. It is always there, throbbing, burning, torturing you even when you think yourself cured."

She turned her face to Kate, white and sorrowful and strangely earnest. The youth and beauty of it lent a deeper pathos to its altered expression.

"I have told you my story," she said, "because I—I want to help you. No woman should throw away her youth, her beauty, herself, as a sacrifice to any one, or anything. It is a cruel thing, a base thing. It is bound to exact punishment or lead to wrong. There is no help for it. It must. And even if you grow fairly content, if you do your duty, if you stifle feeling, there is always the chance of some one else appearing to disturb your peace—to force you into thinking how different life might have been, and then—well, then there is no more peace for you ever—ever again!"

"But if you knew that—that some one else was unworthy—if you knew that nothing could ever come of it, if it was all over, done with, finished,

might you not grow fairly content with your lot. At least you are doing good to other people by your sacrifice."

"That might be so," answered Mrs. Lafaye. "If you were quite sure that the other case was final. But you cannot always be sure."

Kate was silent. Her thoughts went back to a scene not yet two days old. She had said to herself that was final, but—was it?

She clasped her hands with a sudden gesture of pain and impatience. Her lips trembled; a torrent of words seemed struggling for freedom. . . . All those hurt proud memories—all those commonplace unemotional things which had made up the sum of her life at Croft—all the suggestions and hopes that had fallen to the ground like a child's card castle . . . all these rushed back on her like a flood and threatened to destroy that self-control which years of suppression had made into a habit.

"You may tell me—what you please," said Mrs. Lafaye gently, as she laid her small child-like hand on the girl's clasped and nervous fingers. "I said I would be your friend. I mean it."

"Oh, and I need one!" Kate cried passionately. "I am so tired of being always alone—of keeping everything—thoughts, feelings, desires—crushed up within myself. Oh, I am so unhappy . . . so dreadfully unhappy!"

She bent her face on her hands. She was trembling greatly. She felt half afraid of what she might say under pressure of so vivid and strong an emotion.

"I knew you were unhappy," said Mrs. Lafaye, a thrill of passionate feeling in her voice. "Perhaps that drew me to you. There is affinity in friendship as well as in love. Tell me all. Perhaps I can help you."

Kate shook her head. "I am afraid not," she said, "and there seems so little to tell. It is all so foolish . . . so unlike anything I had imagined happening to myself."

"It is always unlike what we imagine," said Mrs. Lafaye softly. "Was it,—here?"

"Yes. . . . Some one I met. He seemed so brave and generous and kind-hearted and we were such good friends. There was no sentiment . . . . He never said anything that might lead me to suppose he cared . . . . in the way you think. And then I found out something . . . . it was a terrible shock—it seemed so mean and small and—treacherous. Something I could never have believed of him . . . . but I saw it with my own eyes. There was no mistaking—there could be no excuse. I saw that and then . . . . well, he went away—and I accepted Sir Wilfred. It didn't seem to matter any longer what I did or how I suffered . . . . Everything else was ended."

"Are you sure you were not mistaken? . . . . When I look at you I can just imagine the sort of man you would care for. But there could never be anything mean or dishonourable about him."

"Do you think I would not have made excuses if I could," cried the girl passionately. "Do you think I would not have been thankful to accept happiness

when I had the chance—I—who all my life have been craving and hungering for it . . . . No—there was no mistake. I will tell you the story."

She told it briefly and coldly, the bare crude facts; and Mrs. Lafaye listened with deep interest.

"There is one thing I never can understand," said Kate in conclusion. "And that is how he knew about what happened on the Christmas Eve before I left town. It could hardly have been a guess—yet no one but myself knew of it . . . . and—one other person."

"Who was that other person?" asked Mrs Lafaye.

"Well," said Kate laughing and colouring, "I don't know if you have such people in America—but really he was a bailiff. A man put in for debt owed by my father."

"But how could your friend, Mr. Rivers, know anything about that?" exclaimed Mrs. Lafaye in wonder.

"That is what puzzles me. If I told you the real truth . . . . but it seems so ridiculous, you will only laugh——"

"My dear, I never felt further from laughing in my life . . . . it is most interesting; the very improbabilities make it so, please tell me all, if you don't mind."

"As I've begun I may just as well tell you all," said Kate. She rose and stood leaning against the chimney-piece, her face a little averted from the brilliant watchful eyes of the American woman.

"Well, then—the strangest part of the whole matter is this. The . . . . the young man in possession, reminded me of some one I had met before

but, I never could remember who it was — or where we had met. He declared he was a cabinet-maker . . . . he certainly was wonderfully well mannered and educated . . . . and good-looking——"

"Kate." . . . . interrupted Mrs. Lafaye gravely— "is it possible that I shall have to acknowledge you as a fraud. What business had you talking to and— flirting—with a superior young workman. You are not a Democrat, you know."

"I assure you," said Kate earnestly, "there was nothing of the sort. My father was ill, the servant was out and . . . . he and I made the Christmas pudding."

Mrs. Lafaye's silvery laughter sounded in uncontrolled mirth through the room.

"Why, this is perfectly fascinating," she exclaimed joyously. "It would awaken enthusiasm in a politician! It has faintly dawned upon me, Kate, that that Christmas pudding may form a connecting link between your two admirers."

"I don't see how that could be," answered Kate; "and please don't jump at conclusions. I do want some help. Tom Smith, the bailiff, told me he had a double—some one so curiously like himself that—but for their relative stations in life they could scarcely be distinguished. When I came here and met Tom Rivers, the first thing that flashed across my mind was this story of the double——"

"Better and better," murmured Mrs. Lafaye. "The interest gets psychological. . . . And so you left Tom Smith at your house in town and found his *Dôpplegänger* here at Croft in the person of Tom Rivers.

The two names alike, and the two persons alike . . . but what about the personality—the individuals themselves? Any likeness between them?"

"Just enough to make the affair puzzling," said Kate. "Both were cool and self-possessed, a trifle cynical, with strong Radical tendencies and strong common-sense views of men, and things in general: of course there the likeness ended. Mr. Rivers was essentially a gentleman, clever, well-bred, accomplished, a little too self-confident, and a little too much given to ridicule existing habits, manners and institutions. But he was a delightful companion."

She sighed, remembering pleasant hours and talk and confidences—things which only proved the instability of men and their lamentable want of principle, when regarded from her present stand-point of disillusion.

"In the respect of companionship," interrupted Mrs. Lafaye gravely, "the cabinetmaker seems to have run the gentleman pretty close."

Kate coloured. "I assure you," she said, "the difference was wonderfully little. And I'm very particular and sensitive on such points."

"Might they not have known one another?" suggested Mrs. Lafaye.

Kate shook her head. "Hardly possible. At least Mr. Rivers seemed quite ignorant of his Double."

"Where is he now—Mr. Rivers I mean?"

"I really don't know. In town I suppose. I wonder you have never met him. I believe he goes into very good society, and he is a friend of Lady Jocelyn's and —Sir Wilfred's."

"That will make it a little—awkward—for you, if

you marry Sir Wilfred. Doesn't that strike you?"

Kate said nothing, She was conscious of a sense of relief—she was glad she had spoken . . . and yet doubtful as to the wisdom of her candour.

"If I gave you my candid opinion," Mrs. Lafaye went on, "I should say there's some mistake. Oh, don't shake your head in restive fashion. You're a very clever girl, I've no doubt, but even clever people make mistakes—sometimes. And although he wrote that card for Sir Wilfred, it wasn't exactly a crime. He knew, and every one in the house knew, that he was bound to formulate a proposal soon or late. If Mr. Rivers wanted the coast clear, it was no great harm to hurry up his rival and get him off the scene, or see him fixed up on it for good."

"I think it was a mean trick," said Kate coldly. "And then the bad taste of bringing up what had happened in town, of pretending that it had made such an impression on me! What right had he to place me in such a humiliating position?"

"No right, I grant . . . but perhaps he just thought he'd play out the little drama and abide by the results."

"I hope he is satisfied with those results," said Kate bitterly.

"I should like to know that young man," said Mrs. Lafaye presently. "There's something original about him. And I'm sure he's not the sort to take defeat quietly, and go off the scene, as you say he's done. Does he know you've accepted Sir Wilfred?"

"No," said Kate. "I told you I refused him the night of the theatricals. But then—well, the disap-

pointment of this discovery, and my father's persuasions, and Wilfred's entreaties—and perhaps a sort of desperation on my own part—made me give in. Sir Wilfred doesn't ask me to love him, or pretend to care about him. He's quite contented with a one-sided bargain. I told him very plainly how matters stood.... Men are very strange, it seems to me."

"They are detestable, in some ways," said Mrs. Lafaye indignantly. "Oh, Kate, you mustn't marry this man—you really mustn't. It's cruel—it's sacrilegious—it's downright wicked. Will you trust me to try and get you out of it?"

Kate looked at her with wonder. "I don't feel I'm acting a very creditable part," she said. "And I've certainly gained a very bad character for myself here. But if I accept Sir Wilfred one day, and break off the engagement the next—well, you must confess I shall serve all the opprobrium I get."

"I think," said Mrs. Lafaye slowly, "you will be able to bear it. I concluded long ago that it was a waste of energy to try and persuade people to believe you're different to what they *say* you are."

"Well, they say I'm everything that's bad," said Kate with a little tired sigh. She sank down on the chair again and seemed to give herself up to reflection.

"Two more days and all this will be over, and I shall go back to the old life and the old ways. I shall make my own gowns, and cook my father's luncheon, and scold Biddy, the maid-of-all-work, and try if tradespeople will take promises instead of payment. And then—when I am sick and tired of it

all—they will suggest I had better get married . . . and perhaps in desperation I shall say, 'Get the licence and get it over.' And then—well, I suppose I shall be no worse off than the general run of women one meets. Few of them are happy."

"But you might be—you ought to be. I've no special influence over you—I wish I had. If I were your sister or your mother——" She broke off and laughed her pretty chiming laugh. "Well, that's on the cards anyhow. I might make myself fascinating to your father and help you that way."

Kate shuddered involuntarily. "Don't jest," she said. "Somehow I'm not in the mood for it. I more than appreciate your confidence . . . and your interest in me, bnt I don't see that you can help me —or indeed any one else."

"The difficulty is not insurmountable," said Mrs. Lafaye, regarding her thoughtfully, "and I'm in want of occupation. I always get into mischief when I'm idle . . . or else I get morbid. And I hate being morbid. I shall have to thank you for rousing me in time. These women here would have brought on an attack."

"I think," said Kate, smiling, "you are more than equal to their capacity—either for annoyance or insult."

"Oh, I'm not afraid, but I prefer to be unmolested and not to be ruffled . . . and that dowager in the purple velvet, she does set my back up. However, I'm not going to let her disturb my sleep to-night. Now, I suppose you're just about dying to go to your retiring-room. We've been very feminine, haven't

we? A long talk and a confidence almost tragic. Well, I'll wish you good-night, but remember—what I say I mean, and what I mean I generally do—I'm going to get you out of this fix and see you settled straight and happy before . . . well, before another Christmas Eve comes round."

CHAPTER XX.

"PACKING UP."

EVERY one agreed that it was too bad. Not only had Kate O'Brien secured the matrimonial prize but the friendship and championship of the rich and fascinating visitor. For Mrs. Lafaye made no secret of her admiration and liking, and took a genuine, if somewhat malicious, delight in sounding Kate's praises in the ears of the feminine coterie at Croft.

"What could she see in her?" the dowagers asked each other, and looked with the impartial criticism of mothers on the various charms of their own brood. The "brood" agreed that it was incomprehensible. The girl wasn't even pretty. She hadn't bad hair, but then her eyes were so bold, and as for the lashes, any one could see they were "touched up." And her figure—why, she was a perfect Maypole. And did any one ever see such dresses? They must have come from Tottenham Court Road, or the Bon Marché at Kilburn. She had no style whatever. Mrs. Lafaye listened and enjoyed it all, and led them on to say even worse things with a quiet suggestion of pleasure that was infinitely subtile, and would have deceived more guileless people than these. She learnt also that the other "catch," Tom Rivers, had been deluded into a flirtation, and by dint of various questions and

judicious hints, made herself acquainted with a good deal of that young man's history. There was one person at Croft, however, who made it very apparent that he did not admire or like the lovely American, and that was Sir Wilfred. Whether he detected animosity in her friendly glances, or scented danger in her subtile suggestions, or felt that she could even make him appear a bigger fool than most people, it is impossible to say, but in his heart he disliked and was afraid of her, and felt instinctively that she was entirely opposed to his marriage with Kate. Besides, she was always in the way whenever he wanted to talk to his *fiancée*, always monopolising her, or making a third in the party, and the worst of it was that Kate seemed to like it. She was so fond of Mrs. Lafaye that apparently she could not endure her absence for half-an-hour. So, all things considered, it was no wonder that Sir Wilfred sulked and moped and found fault with his mother for asking the "meddling Yankee-woman," as he politely called her, on this visit.

The last day of Kate's stay at Croft had arrived, and still he had not been able to have a word with her alone or get her to listen either to his love-making or his ardent desire for a speedy union. He grew sullen and discontented. It was all very well to say to Kate that he did not expect any display of affection, and was content—dog-like—with an occasional pat on the head to show he was remembered, but in his heart he began to acknowledge that a one-sided courtship was very uphill work, and not at all pleasant, even to so modest a suitor as himself. He

consulted his father-in-law, and the worthy Cornelius cheered him to the best of his ability. He assured the young man that girls were so odd and so fanciful that there really was no knowing what to make of them . . . that they never knew their own minds . . . that their elders had always to counsel and look after them.

As far as he himself was concerned, Cornelius was delighted that Mrs. Lafaye should have taken such a fancy to Kate. He knew her friendship possessed a certain marketable value.

Sir Wilfred, however, was not to be consoled even by the Irishman's talk, and had sulked himself into a fit of the blues by the time that last evening came. Even the prospect of a speedy "run up" to town to see his affianced did not present itself in a cheering aspect, and as for the marriage itself that seemed too vague and far off an event to be even hinted at. He sulked during dinner, and absolutely glared at Mrs. Lafaye, who sat opposite, in a dress that some one described as a "dream of pearls and gossamer." Certainly it was airy enough and fragile enough to have been the creation of a fairy's loom. As usual she was entertaining the whole of her side of the table, and apparently quite ignorant of Sir Wilfred's wrathful sentiments.

"Who the d——l could have been such a fool as to say the 'American woman' is the 'most perfect creation of the century,'" he muttered wrathfully.

"I think it was some one writing in the New York *Herald*," said Kate, glancing with some amusement at his gloomy face. "You don't agree with him, I see."

"Agree?—not such a fool. Their good looks always remind me of those strawberry ices—all pink and white, that melt if you touch them, don't yer know. And as for cleverness, it's only rattle, and cheek, and that sort of cool impudence that you'd never stand in an English woman."

"You are quite exceptional in your opinion," said Kate coldly. "Their charm is universally acknowledged."

"I can't understand your caring for such a chattering doll as that," continued Sir Wilfred wrathfully.

Kate laughed. "If you talked to her for ten minutes you'd soon change your opinion. But I don't believe you've addressed as many words to her yet."

"I wish you'd give me a chance of talking to you, Kate," he said, dropping into sentiment as suddenly as the celebrated Boffin used to "drop into poetry."

The girl flushed and looked annoyed. "I am afraid conversation is not our strong point," she said. "We—we don't seem to have much in common."

"No. I suppose I look an awful fool to you because I can't talk politics like Rivers, or 'reel off' stories by the yard like Mrs. Lafaye. I'm doosed sorry, but it isn't in me. I can't help it. I never could learn much. The doctors told my mother it was liver, and the masters told me it was laziness. I suppose both were right. I wish I was clever, but——"

"But there's no royal road to cleverness any more than to learning," said Kate.

"I was going to say that you'll make up for that,

don't yer know . . . you're clever enough for both of us."

"Thank you," said Kate, very coldly. "Only it might be just possible that I consider the balance should be a little more evenly adjusted."

"No, but really, Kate, don't yer know, if you'd just say when you really would—would—marry me——"

"Excuse me—your mother is giving the signal to retire." And Kate rose.

"Just like my luck," muttered Sir Wilfred wrathfully. "What the doose makes my mother in such a hurry to-night?"

And he consoled himself by a bumper of champagne, and the conversation of Cornelius, who was particularly genial and charming to-night. He wished to institute another trifling loan before shaking the hospitable dust of Croft from his patent-leather boots—in plain parlance before leaving the smoking-room to-night. It was not therefore surprising or impolitic that he should devote his talents and energies to the exclusive entertainment of his amiable host.

"I say, O'Brien," grumbled the young baronet, "I hope you'll cut that Yankee woman when you get to town. She's awful bad style, don't yer know, and she's only hanging on to Kate to annoy me."

"My dear boy," laughed the genial Cornelius, "what an absurd idea! Annoy you! Why, faith, I thought 'twas the other way about. She has a little *tendresse* that way, I fancy. Haven't you noticed her glances?"

"No, nor don't want to," answered Sir Wilfred sulkily. "She ain't my style, as I've told Kate. Can't imagine why society takes up these Americans?"

"They've two amiable qualities as a rule," said Cornelius—"good looks and dollars."

"Humph! The looks of a wax-doll and about as lasting, as I told Kate," said Sir Wilfred, who was waxing quite eloquent now he had a grievance. "I've read all that 'rot' in the New York *Trumpeter* about them. They're so lovely, so fascinating, so clever! Not true—not a word of it. Bold as brass, cheeky as . . . well, you know—always airing their opinions and slanging everything in this country because it's so different to New York. A jolly good thing it is."

"Whence this bitterness?" laughed O'Brien. "Has our fair friend from New York offended you?"

"Never speak to her," said Sir Wilfred. "She's too 'smart' altogether for me. Besides, I hate parrots."

Cornelius surveyed him with mild surprise. "Oh, fie, my dear boy. At least allow she doesn't repeat other people's chatter. She's original, even if a trifle assertive."

"Oh, you and Kate seem agreed that she's perfection," grumbled the little baronet. "But mark my words, O'Brien, I may be a fool—I s'pose I am—but I can see a yard or two before my nose for all that. Now, you look here, that woman don't like me, and she does like Kate, and she's trying to persuade her not to marry me. If it's any pleasure to you to help

her schemes, you've only got to encourage the intimacy. That's all."

Cornelius sipped his wine thoughtfully, and reflected on what his prospective son-in-law had said. Was he right? or was it mere jealousy that made him speak like this? He was inclined to the latter view of the question. What possible objection could Mrs. Lafaye have to the marriage? Weren't all Americans mad about titles and ready to worship their owners? Surely Kate as Lady Jocelyn would be a far more lovable acquaintance than plain Miss O'Brien.

"I really think you're mistaken, Jocelyn," he said, with a candid and impartial air that ought to have been convincing. "But I'll give Kate a hint on the subject. By the way, have you settled anything—definite—as to the happy event yet?"

"Can't get a word alone with her. . . . All that d——d officious chatterbox. . . . Awfully hard, don't yer know, when I worship the very ground she walks on. I assure you, O'Brien, I—I never knew it was in me to feel like this for any girl . . . never, 'pon my honour. I'd do anything she told me—I would indeed."

He was almost tearful in the intensity of his emotions. Cornelius pressed his hand in token of sympathy. "Cheer up, my boy, it'll be all right. When she gets home and settles down quietly again I'll have a talk with her. Naturally a girl who's been so admired and had so many offers as my daughter Kate, must have her head given her for a while. But don't be uneasy. She's a straight goer, and

once she's given her word, by Jove, sir, she'll be no O'Brien if she doesn't keep it."

"Thank you," said Sir Wilfred tearfully. "You're —you're awfully good . . . 'pon my honour. I—I won't forget you, O'Brien. One good turn, you know . . ."

He gulped down champagne and tears together, and then rose—somewhat unsteadily, it must be confessed—and proposed they should rejoin the ladies.

The atmosphere of the drawing-room seemed less serene than its wont. The "banjo young lady" had given up her delightful accomplishment since Sir Wilfred had not "winked" that affirmative response to her overture of affection which she had once fondly anticipated. The banjo was mute, the strings were tuneless, and the silvery voice of its owner was hushed in despair and disgust. It was all the fault of "that girl," and that girl herself was sitting at the piano now, singing in her lovely rich contralto one of Moore's tender and pathetic melodies.

The dowagers looked impatient; the girls—united by a common cause, and inspired by a sense of injustice—were supremely and languidly indifferent to the voice of the syren who had beguiled their prey. Only Lady Jocelyn and Mrs. Jackson Lafaye seemed to be listening, and the flutter of fans and incessant whispering were rather an annoyance to the latter. As the song ceased she addressed the company generally. "When I write my book on English Society, its Manners and Mysteries," she said, "I sha'n't fail to mention the general appreciation of drawing-room music. It seems all one to

you whether you hire it or perform it yourselves. It's not a thing to be listened to, that's plain. I surmise it all comes of that curious shyness and diffidence of yours. You're shy even of hearing your own voices, unless they're backed up by some other noise. I wonder you don't hire in piano-organs or a band. A band's a fine aid to conversation. I should say it was immeasurably superior to the human voice—or fingers."

It was while the indignant assemblage were digesting this rude speech that the male members of the party appeared—a black but welcome cloud—in the doorway. Most of them made for that fatal attraction in gossamer and pearls. Sir Wilfred rushed to the piano to entreat Kate to sing another song, but mindful of Mrs. Lafaye's remarks she declined to give further "conversational cover."

He then tried to beguile her into the conservatory, but she was obdurate and skilfully evaded any possibility of a *tête-à-tête*.

He had therefore to console himself by the remembrance of her father's counsels and sundry cigarettes in the smoking-room. Kate, with visions of "packing" on her mind, retired early to her maiden chamber, and before long she was joined in that sacred abode by Mrs. Lafaye, who proposed to "assist" at the operation of filling her one modest trunk.

She folded up some laces and sash ribbons, and talked a great deal. Kate found her of considerable service.

She gently insinuated at last that the business in hand might be expedited by her friend sitting herself

down in the easy-chair and leaving the more arduous work of folding, shaking, and fixing things into the smallest possible compass to Kate herself.

"I'm used to it," she explained. "You see, I've never possessed the doubtful luxury of a maid."

"I'm not sure that I wasn't happier when I didn't possess one," said Mrs. Lafaye. "They are somewhat of a burden. I must say you do manage your servants here better than we do in our country. We've really no servants worth speaking of, except niggers. The white folk appear to be ladies in reduced circumstances, and they all seem to think work is an injustice, and the acceptance of wages a condescension. Even when Americans come to Europe and take servants out with them, they can't keep them. In three months they're as bad as those of the country, more so perhaps. As for wages . . . you know Vanderbilt pays £2,000 a year to his cook, and I know heaps of rich Americans who give £500 a year for a man *chef*, with a French name and little else to recommend him."

"So even a free country has its disadvantages?" said Kate, smiling.

She was folding up the daffodil satin, and Mrs. Lafaye watched her admiringly.

"You don't really mean to say you make your own dresses?" she asked.

"Indeed I do," said Kate. "It's a case of 'needs must.' I'm afraid they've rather an amateur look about them, haven't they?"

"They're on a figure that makes one forget the dress," said Mrs. Lafaye. "I do envy you your

height and carriage, Kate. What's the good of splendid gowns when you're as little as I am? You only look like a Parisian doll. You even can't be impressive."

"Isn't it better to be—fascinating?" said Kate.

Mrs. Lafaye looked thoughtfully into the fire as if giving the subject due consideration.

"No," she said, "I conclude I'd rather impress folks than amuse them; and fascination's only another word for that."

"You might be anything," said Kate. "Try a new departure."

Mrs. Lafaye shook her head and began to unclasp the bracelets on her pretty bare arms. "It would be a ghastly failure," she said. "I think I'd better remain as I am. Nature doesn't often cast our souls into a larger mould than our frames."

"Oh, I can't agree with you there. Great souls and gifted minds have often been encased in a very unpromising external sheath. Have you ever given your attention to poets? Of all people they seem to me to be the least prepossessing in appearance. I could mention a score who are particularly ill-favoured,—men and women alike. I suppose nature thinks that to have a beautiful mind is ample consolation for an ugly face or a disproportioned frame."

"Beauty's an odd thing. I can't say I appreciate its use," says Mrs. Lafaye. "And it's very short-lived. Besides, the worst of it is, if you look pale or tired, or your gown doesn't happen to suit you, people at once set about that you're 'going off.' It's a dreadful bore to keep up the reputation; and you're

always being criticised, and never accepted for your own sake. You get talked about before you meet people, and that makes them ill-disposed. Then when they do see you they always say, '*That* woman pretty? Oh! how can you say so?' And then they pick you to pieces. I needn't describe the process."

Kate laughed. "No," she said, "it has been illustrated—even here."

"Well," said Mrs. Lafaye with a sigh, "I'm awfully sorry you're going. But I shall soon look you up in town. You're not to say you're 'not at home,' mind."

"Oh, no," said Kate, laughing. "I'm not so over-burdened with visitors that I ever feel it necessary to deny myself to one. Sometimes for weeks together I've no one to speak to but Biddy."

"Your father leaves you alone a great deal?"

"Yes; of course he has his club, and his friends, and—occupations."

"No doubt," said Mrs. Lafaye dryly, "and they must be engrossing."

Her tone was hard, and the look in her bright eyes as she turned them on Kate was not altogether a satisfied look. The girl was still busy, folding and packing away the various trifles and possessions scattered about.

"Men haven't many domestic virtues," continued Mrs. Lafaye after a pause. "I suppose we shouldn't expect it of them. Trifles don't amuse them or afford the absorbing interest they do to us."

"I'm afraid I don't find domestic interests absorb-

ing," said Kate. "I simply detest housekeeping. I've only had one idea all my life, and that is to be an actress."

"Is that so?" exclaimed Mrs. Lafaye in surprise. "Oh, I don't think you'd like the life. It's awfully hard, and even under the best auspices you can't escape a certain amount of roughing."

"I shouldn't mind that," said Kate, her eyes kindling. "Anything would be better than the conventional drudgery I have undergone and still must undergo."

Mrs. Lafaye seemed to consider her worthy of anxious inspection, and her face grew almost grave as she contemplated the flushed cheeks and quivering lips, and the queenly pose of that girlish figure.

"How do you manage to suppress yourself?" she asked at last. "Isn't it hard?"

"Hard!" exclaimed Kate. "I should think it was hard. I feel well-nigh desperate sometimes! But then I say to myself it's only a sort of—illness. It can't last. It comes of moping, and stagnation, and worry, and monotony combined. I'll get over it after a while, but while it lasts——"

"Oh, Kate," said her friend softly, "I know—I know. How I feel for you! How I wish I could help you!"

Kate calmed herself by a strong effort.

"I shall have to go back to it all to-morrow—or marry Sir Wilfred. A real 'choice of evils'—is it not?" she said.

She closed the lid of the box and locked it; then turned to the fire and the pretty figure sitting there

on the low padded chair. She was trembling greatly.

Mrs. Lafaye drew her close to herself with a gentle caressing gesture.

"You need not speak," she said, "I understand. And I have vowed to help you."

"No one can do that," sobbed Kate, her self-command broken down for once. "Life is very cruel to some people."

"Yes, but not too cruel for consolation. Don't give way, child, it is no use to cry—like that."

Her own tears were falling in sympathy. Her own miserable, reckless girlhood came back to her memory in the sobs and broken words of this girl for whom she cared so deeply, who had seemed so cold and proud and self-composed to the world at large.

Kate checked her sobs and raised her beautiful head. "You are quite right," she said, "it is no use—not even relief."

"But there must be relief—somewhere!" cried Mrs. Lafaye impetuously. "You're too young, and too beautiful, and too—well, hundreds of other things—to be unhappy always. Fate can't be so spiteful."

"I don't know if I should call it Fate," said the girl slowly. "Has it ever struck you how curious a thread of misfortune runs through the destiny of some persons? They seem to be singled out for every species of trouble and ill-luck. If such a destiny is the inherited fruit of past sins on the part of our ancestors, we have not much to thank them for."

"That's true," said Mrs. Lafaye emphatically. "There are wise folk who talk of the 'inexhaustible

capabilities' of life. My opinion is there's nothing but a limited company of them, with the shares ready granted. You only know how small a sphere you move in when, in spite of all efforts to get out of it, you find you are impelled by associations, or circumstances, or events, to follow a course quite opposed to your inclinations. The old Greeks were right when they made the Fates a group. They don't act singly, or affect us singly—only through and with others."

"That is the worst of it," sighed the girl, "only through and with others. If one could act alone, or if the actions only affected oneself, life might be an individual benefit sometimes."

"Instead of a common misfortune," said Mrs. Lafaye. "Still, one can't be happy alone. Indeed there's nothing one can enjoy as an unaccompanied solo, except a book or a sleep. If we want life to be interesting we must look upon it as a psychological drama in which we play our own part, ill or well, as the fancy takes us, and wait for the *dénouement.*"

"I should like to know mine," said the girl.

"Then there'd be no more interest," answered Mrs. Lafaye.

Kate rose and shook back her loose rich hair with an impatient gesture.

"I don't come of a very patient race," she said, "and it is a hard task to sit still and 'command one's soul in patience.'"

"When you have done that for years," said Mrs. Lafaye softly, "you may call it hard. Don't de-

spair, Kate. After all, you are very young, and the young have always life's best gift—Hope. . . . Now good-night. Remember, you are not to forget me, and that come what may I shall always stand your friend. Say you believe me."

"I am only too glad to say that. Indeed, I do believe you," said Kate.

CHAPTER XXI.

DISCOVERED!

"WELL, Biddy! here we are back again. Any news?"

"News, is it, Miss Kate darlin'? Devil a bit. There's a pile o' letters for the master, and there's been a hape o' enquiries for him. And onst, that young man—him with the ulster coat who took Fletcher's place—he called. 'When might the family be comin' back, Biddy?' sez he. 'Shure,' sez I, 'it's with Royalty they're staying, and they can't be spared this long while,' I sez. 'Maybe you'll lave your card.' But he only laughed and went away."

"He's in a devil of a hurry," muttered Cornelius wrathfully. He was not in a genial frame of mind. He seldom was on his return to town. People had an unpleasant knack of reminding him of unpaid bills, County Court summonses, and various trifling obligations which he had airily thrown aside at the hour of departure, and whose claims he resented as an offence to his own ready forgetfulness.

Kate found him in the drawing-room when she had removed her travelling wraps. Biddy had a brilliant fire for them, and the gipsy-table for afternoon tea was daintily laid out. By way of adding to the festive appearance of things, that worthy

handmaiden had donned what she called a "Frinch cap with tails," and on the strength of this adornment was particularly dignified and affable.

Cornelius O'Brien, who was not particularly anxious to be left alone with Kate, detained her in the room on various pretexts. As for Kate herself, she poured out the tea and gave some to her father and leant back in her old low, shabby chair, listening to the conversation and taking little or no part in it.

After a while a remark of her father's aroused her attention. "There'll be no need, Biddy," he said loftily, "for any more of those little . . . ahem—evasions—on your part. I intend to settle with all my creditors, every one of them, shortly."

Biddy was so overpowered by this announcement that she could only stare.

"All of them, sor?" she repeated breathlessly.

"All," answered Cornelius with dignity. "My fortunes have taken a turn, Biddy."

"For the better, sor? May the saints be praised for that same."

"They could hardly have taken one for the worse," laughed Cornelius. "It's all your young mistress's doing," he went on vivaciously; "she's going to make a grand marriage, Biddy. Now, what have you got to say to that?"

"Say!" Biddy resumed her lost dignity. "What could the likes o' me be saying, save that the Prince Royal himself, nor the Lord Archbishop of Canterbury would be axing any too much if 'twas Miss Kate's hand they'd be afther requesting! Shure she's fit to be a quane—God bless her!"

The tears rushed into the warm-hearted creature's eyes. Kate looked up, somewhat annoyed, yet reluctant to spoil Biddy's gratification. Cornelius, having drunk his cup of tea and fired off his news, left the room somewhat hastily, merely pausing at the door to explain that he would dine at his club, so Biddy need not trouble to prepare anything for him.

"And is it thrue, Miss Kate, darlin'?" exclaimed Biddy, as the door closed. "Didn't I say ye'd be winnin' all the young min's hearts in that gowlden gown of yours . . . and shure it's myself wouldn't be surprised to hear they'd all been fightin' duills and murderin' one another for ye. And to think all our troubles is over. . . . Ah, the saints be praised. 'Twas the lucky hour whin ye wint to Croft, Miss Kate, honey."

"I don't know about that," said her young mistress drearily. "And besides, Biddy, I'm not married—yet."

"What's ailin' ye, Miss Kate? Shure ye don't look as happy as I'd be expecting ye to look. Aren't ye fond of the gintleman?"

Kate put down her cup and leant back in the chair, clasping her hands behind her head.

"No, Biddy, honestly, I'm not," she said. "And if I do marry him I'm sure I shall be very unhappy. But, as things are, something must be done. We're on the very brink of ruin and . . . well, there's no other way."

"There must be another way, darlin', if it's you that are to be made unhappy. Why shouldn't the

master marry a rich widdy-woman now? Shure there's plinty of thim about."

Kate was silent. She felt too weary in body and mind to enter upon such a discussion. The strain of the past fortnight began to make itself felt, and she only longed to be alone. Alone with her own thoughts, her own regrets, her own memories.

However, Biddy was not so easily got rid of. She had all the faithful Irish domestic's curiosity, stimulated not only by sympathy and affection, but also by a long acquaintance with those "shafts and arrows of outrageous fortune" for which the O'Brien household had so long been an inviting target. Kate had therefore to tell her all about Croft and its guests, to describe Sir Wilfred and Lady Jocelyn, and to be alternately commiserated or congratulated, according as the splendour of the position, or the deficiencies of its possessor, occurred to Biddy's mind.

At last she seemed satisfied and tossed back the "tails" of her new head-dress with the additional dignity she now felt had accrued to her since the improvement in the family prospects. She was torn by the conflict of her feelings and ambition. She had great ideas of the honour due to the name of O'Brien, and not for worlds would she have betrayed to any one that their fortunes were "under a cloud." Had she accompanied her young mistress to Croft she would have scathingly condemned its magnificence as being in no way worthy to compare with those of her master's Ancestral Halls in Ireland, though she would have been diplomatic enough to

have withheld the fact that those said "halls" were rapidly falling into decay, and that the "state" kept up in them consisted of a mildewed "boy" who was verging upon threescore and ten, and an equally ancient housekeeper, to whom the honour of her position seemed equivalent to years of arrears in wages.

"By the way," said Kate suddenly, "did you say, Biddy, that that young man Smith had called here? What did he want?"

"He *said* he wanted to know whin the master would be returning," said Biddy. "'Twas at the airy-door he was spaking to me. I invited him in, but he wouldn't accipt. Seemed in a moighty hurry, Miss Kate. But he'd jist the same pleasant word and way wid him as iver."

Kate's face grew suddenly cold and stern. "If he calls again, Biddy," she said, "bring him up to me. I wish to see him."

"I will, Miss Kate, though why should you be demaning yourself to throuble about the likes o' him? Shure we're done with bailiffs now for iver and iver. The Lord be praised. And as for all thim bothering shopkeepers! (bad scran to them,) won't I be giving them their due now. Ah, you may trust Biddy Callaghan to do that same. Persecutin' a respictable family, the thavin' blagyards. But those days are over, thank the Lord."

"Don't be too sure, Biddy," said Kate coldly. "I'm not married yet, and prospects are poor coinage to offer in payment of debts."

"Trust me to manage that, Miss Kate, and don't

be afther worrying your purty head about it. Shure wouldn't I love to be off this blessed minnit and tell every one of thim dirty tradesfolk that they needn't be troublin' to call for orders. It's not the likes o' thim we'd be employin' now."

"Oh, pray, Biddy, don't do anything of the sort," exclaimed Kate in alarm. "They'd only laugh and insist upon immediate payment, and papa can't command enough ready money yet to satisfy all their claims."

"Well, I'll be politic, Miss Kate, deary, if it's more agrayable to you—whist ! . . . was that a knock?"

"Yes," said Kate. "Perhaps it's Smith again, Biddy. If so, I'll see him. No, you needn't light the lamp. Those two candles are quite light enough with this fire."

Biddy took up the tray and departed. Kate remained there in the same low chair, the firelight playing on her rich hair and the somewhat pale and melancholy beauty of her face.

She lifted her head as the door opened, and glanced somewhat curiously at the visitor—the tall figure in the brown ulster. The fair head with its loose fringe of hair falling over the brows struck her again with that odd sense of familiarity.

"Good-evening, Smith," she said. "Pray come in."

Her voice was cold and constrained. She did not look up as he advanced. He only answered her greeting by a "Good-evening, Miss," spoken in a voice very low and subdued.

"I am sorry," continued Kate, "that you have

had the trouble of calling again for—for nothing. We only returned from the country to-day, and my father has gone out to his club. Perhaps you are surprised that I know your—business—with him. I do—I am very vexed about it. There was no necessity for your generous aid. No, pray do not speak, let me finish. . . . But, be quite sure you will not have to wait long. The money shall be repaid—very soon."

"I . . . indeed, I am in no hurry," stammered the young man, his voice still very low, his face kept studiously in the shadow. "And it was not on that matter I called, pray believe me. It was only just to know that you were well . . . and safe, Miss . . . and had enjoyed your visit."

Kate felt rather astonished. Surely this was a very extraordinary interest for a bailiff to manifest. She looked quickly up, but the face was in shadow, and the down-cast eyes betrayed nothing.

"You can see I am safe and well," she said coldly. "As for my visit and whether I enjoyed it, well, I fail to see how that can possibly interest you. Unless——" She paused. The colour rose to her face and her breath came quicker—"Unless," she went on hurriedly, "you have heard anything about me? For, strangely enough, that mysterious double of yours was staying at Croft . . . Lady Jocelyn's country house. I was quite startled by the likeness."

The leaping fire-flames seemed to throw a ruddy glow on the young man's cheek. He shifted his position uneasily.

"He is very like, I've heard," he said meekly.

"Now, Smith," said Kate gravely, "do you mean to say you've never seem him yourself? He lives in London, so he told me, and he is always going to working men's meetings, and agitating for reforms in labour, and generally championing the oppressed and down-trodden class for whom your sympathies also are so strong. If you have not come across one another, it is very odd."

"Maybe we shall meet some day," observed Smith. "Don't you know, Miss, that it's just the people likeliest to meet that never do meet. I've got a cousin, now," he added by way of illustration. "He's in the Salvation Army. I do assure you, Miss, I've met battalions, and regiments, and reserve companies, and all sorts of companies of them in the streets at different times, but never by any chance have I come across that one particular company in which my cousin Luke is serving. It's very queer, but so it is."

"It *is* very queer," said Kate slowly and thoughtfully.

She leant forward and stirred the fire into a blaze. The bright light leapt up, and shone vividly around, and threw its ruddy glow over the young man's face, and into the startled, conscious eyes that Kate forced to meet the challenge of her own.

Neither of them spoke, but that long steady gaze was more eloquent than any words. The girl rose slowly to her feet in a dazed, bewildered fashion. Her face grew white as death. The proud, firm lips parted, but no words came. She felt so sure—

so sure—and yet . . . it was so hard, so almost impossible to assert her conviction.

"Would you mind," she said at last—"would you mind . . . lifting—that hair from your forehead—Tom Smith?"

She had no need to ask more—she had no need to say what he knew she must say—what he felt would be condemnation and shame to hear. He tossed back the disguising hair with a sudden reckless desperation.

He stood there before her, revealed and conscience-stricken, for the space of one awful humiliating moment. Then . . . he was at her feet—her hands clasped in his. "You are right, Kate, Tom Smith is—Tom Rivers. Be angry, indignant, scornful, what you please—I've only one excuse! Surely you are woman enough to hear it, and let it plead for me. . . . Oh, Kate, I did it all because I loved you—because I was mad to see you—know you—be near you. I never knew it was to your house I came that Christmas Eve. Ask Fletcher if you don't believe me—only, when I found you in all that trouble—I—I could not go. Oh! don't look like that. Am I so utterly beneath you? I've been foolish—I've been rash . . . but if you knew how I love you. . . . Oh, Kate, don't turn away—you must listen—you *shall!*"

He sprang to his feet and faced her. She had snatched her hands from his grasp and covered her face with them—her face from which that first burning flush of shame had faded into livid whiteness.

"Don't touch me—don't speak to me!" she cried. "How dared you do it—how dared you——"

He stood mute and trembling; the whiteness of his face rivalled her own.

"Was it because I was poor," she went on, "that you chose to play the spy . . . to add tenfold more shame and humiliation to the burden I bore? . . . Did you think I wasn't worth the ordinary courtesy a gentleman pays to—to even a barmaid? Did you think that lending money to my father to further your own schemes was an action likely to raise you in my estimation? You have lied to me—you have tricked me—you have deceived me, and you call it—love! Faugh! the very words from your lips are an insult. . . . Do you hear?—an insult!"

"Hush!" he said. "For God's sake, listen."

"I will not listen," cried the girl passionately. "Nothing you can say in any way extenuates you. You have violated every principle of courtesy and honour and good faith. If—if you had wished to know me, as you say, you could have made my acquaintance as a gentleman does make the acquaintance of a lady. . . . If—if you had cared for me ever so little in—in the way you say, you might have understood that I would not accept this masquerade as anything but an insult, for which its folly is anything but an excuse!"

"That—that was pure accident at first," he stammered across the broken torrent of her passionate upbraiding.

"And all your after conduct—is that accident? Is it any worthier, any better or more excusable? If so, I fail to see it."

His cheek flushed. Her words gashed him like

whips. He had only looked at the matter from his side hitherto: he forgot how different it might appear from hers.

"I see," he said bitterly, "that you are determined to condemn me. I know I have been a fool, but it is nonsense to say I don't honour you. I wish to God I could tell you how much. But you are determined to be as pitiless now as you were at Croft. Why can't you believe I love you? Is it so unlikely—so impossible? I know I can't undo what I have done; but is your heart so hard—so unforgiving? It's a terrible thing to love as I love you, Kate, and then hear oneself judged and condemned . . . not—not even pitied."

His voice broke. Not all the strength and dignity of manhood could keep the hot salt tears from his eyes as he looked on that beautiful proud face—so cold, so stern, so merciless.

"I fail to see why I should pity you," she said, "or believe in you either. Your whole course of conduct seems to me utterly unworthy and inexcusable. . . . Need I say—more?"

The cold steady look, the gesture of her hand towards the bell as if in dismissal, well-nigh made him desperate.

"I could find it in my heart to wish you too may suffer as you make me," he said passionately. "After all, a man's love isn't a light thing, or given every day. Are you really so cold? Do you hate me? Won't you ever—forgive?"

All the arrogance of her race—all the hurt and offended instincts of her womanhood—all that under-

current of sentiment and softness which had once turned to him, now sprang to force and life with the shamed sense of outrage and offence which her discovery had awakened.

"I shall not ever forgive what I consider an insult to my father and myself. Is that sufficent answer?"

"Quite."—He lifted his head and looked at her —hurt, proud, indignant as herself.

She turned away.

"I shall remind my father of your visit and its cause," she said. "You need not fear he will forget his obligation to so very obliging a 'man in possession.'"

"You—you might have spared me that," he said huskily.

She moved further away into the dusky shadows of the room.

"When you next meet your friend Sir Wilfred, he will probably give you some news that will surprise you. It is not always safe to play the prophet in real life, Mr. Rivers. Sometimes prophecies do come true."

"Kate," he cried hoarsely, "what do you mean? You're not—not——"

"I am going to marry Sir Wilfred Jocelyn," she said steadily.

"When?"

"Next month," she answered.

There was no answer but the sound of the closing door.

CHAPTER XXII.

A "FRIEND IN NEED."

No doubt the outside world had not altered materially in the space of half-an-hour, but to Tom Rivers, as he rushed into the gas-lit streets and saw the moving figures of men and women passing before his dazed eyes, it seemed as if he was in another universe altogether.

The black chaos of his own thoughts engulfed him to the exclusion of everything and every one else. He was enraged at his own folly—he was mad with Kate—he would like to have called out Sir Wilfred, and shot him on the spot. Again and again he cursed the foolish whim that had placed him in so false a position. Again and again those hard, cruel words of the girl he loved rang in his ears, and he heard himself judged and condemned without being able to offer any plea against it.

"What made me go there to-night?" he thought, as he rushed wildly along, choosing the quiet streets by sheer instinct.

Pride, vanity, love—all were wounded almost to the death. He had meant everything to be so different . . . had dreamt of knight-errantry—romance—success—and now one blundering word, one little

bit of misunderstanding, and the whole of his schemes and hopes were dashed to pieces.

He tried to rage at her. He told himself women were but shallow vessels, their passions weak, their instincts faulty, their natures but as shifting sand. Yet, though he raged and railed against the sex and Kate O'Brien at its head, it did not seem to ease his pain. He tossed her—mentally—to all the Fates and Furies, but the red-hot flame of wrath only added to the tortures of that other flame within his breast, and burned and mingled with it until he was as one distraught.

He found himself at last on the Embankment, and visions of suicide presented themselves to his mind, favoured by the shadowy mists that shrouded the melancholy river.

If she heard he was dead, if the news were in the morning papers, would she be sorry then? Would she recognise what the cruelty and mercilessness of woman could mean, and would remorse seize upon her proud heart, and torture her as she had tortured him?

"No. I don't suppose she'd care," he thought, coming to an abrupt standstill. "She'd only go out and buy her wedding-gown as a distraction. . . . I believe women have no hearts. . . . And what fool could have said that Irish girls are romantic, passionate, impulsive? Here's a specimen. . . . If she had been English I wouldn't have wondered at her not approving an unconventional proceeding, but a girl of her race ought to understand and excuse any folly if love for her was the cause of it. . . . And to think of

her throwing herself away on that little fool . . . it's perfectly maddening. What could have made her accept him after refusing him once? . . . Heaven grant me patience! Who can understand the ways of women."

He moved on again. The lights burned dimly in the misty air. The sluggish river made a faint splashing noise against the bank. It had a strange, secret look, that dull-hued water, overcast by the faint, clinging fog; creeping away between its wall of stone and its low-lying mud banks, to some far-off and mysterious distance, where no eye could follow it.

The weirdness and chilliness of the scene oppressed him. Yet there was a certain dreary calm about it that in some way soothed the riot of fevered thoughts and furious rage. He brooded still over the riddle of Kate's strange behaviour. He called her hard and unforgiving, but already the tide was turning in her favour once more. How could he tell what stress had been brought to bear upon her—in what way her father might have drawn her into his scheme? He knew she did not love Sir Wilfred, that she had refused him once, and, with all her faults, she was not a fickle girl.

"Oh, if I had only had a fair chance," he thought, "only wooed and won her then at Croft when I had the opportunity. But Fate seems determined to be spiteful. She is always finding me out playing the fool. . . . Suppose she thinks I am one. . . . Perhaps she's right."

That reflection had a cheering effect apparently.

To abuse oneself soundly and roundly (just allowing a margin for "extenuating circumstances") is sometimes a very salutary proceeding. Youth must go through its period of folly. As Ibsen says, "It has to be. There is no other way." No one pities its sufferings, least of all the person for whom these sufferings are endured, that person being what the story-books call "the object of its affections." And yet, if the "object" only knew how genuine and pure a thing that affection is, how flattered and how grateful she ought to be. The heart of youth in its first love is as a firework flashing heavenwards, and transforming everything with its glow and glory. The glow is brief; the glory, alas! fades into the commonplace descent of the burnt-out case that bore the fiery meteor skywards. But, while it lasts, its brilliance exceeds any other feeling and emotion in the world! if only the "object" would believe it. But, as a rule, she won't. She laughs and mocks and flouts the swain who tries to convince her of his passion; and what can he do, poor youth, save credit her with meaning what she says, and then hie him away to solitude, to pine and die, or console himself with less obdurate maidens.

How many times Tom Rivers paced to and fro by the misty riverside. How much he thought, and vowed, and resolved, and un-resolved. How hard it seemed that he should have escaped all the wiles and witcheries, the snares and allurements of womankind so long, only to fall a victim to an "unrequited attachment."

For with all the will in the world to look upon the

bright side of things, he could not bring himself to believe that Kate cared for him or ever would care—now. He had committed that unpardonable fault in a woman's eyes of placing himself in a position both false and foolish. One of either would have been bad enough, but he had actually succeeded in achieving both. The success had been quite unintentional—indeed he had been almost unaware of it until Kate's words had enlightened him. "That's just the worst of women—confound them!" he muttered wrathfully. "When you're in the right they've a knack of putting you altogether in the wrong. When you've tried your best to do something or get something that you think will please them, they say they never wished or expected it of you. And yet. . . . Oh, Kate, Kate, you seemed so different! No nonsense, no affectation, no prudery. . . . That night when you came down to the kitchen and made the pudding, oh, how sweet and natural and womanly you were. Who could have believed you were the same girl who to-night stood absolutely 'clothed in wrath'—storming at me—stripping off excuse after excuse till I was like a beggar shivering for want of his rags—until——"

"Holloa there!" said a voice suddenly.

The young man oad just turned abruptly, and in so doing had almost run into the arms of another man—a tall soldierly figure—advancing rapidly from the opposite direction.

"I—I beg your pardon," he stammered, stooping to pick up his hat, which had fallen off in the collision.

"I hope I did not hurt you," said the big man.

He was very big. Of quite unusual height, but so admirably proportioned that no one would have wished an inch off his stature.

"Oh, no, not at all . . . it was entirely my fault," said Rivers, glancing up at him with involuntary admiration. They were standing under a lamp-post, and the light fell upon the face of the stranger. It was a very interesting face, all the more so because of the scar that showed so white and strange across the bronzed right cheek. A stern face—a somewhat worn and saddened face, yet the young man felt how far more worthy of admiration and interest than the youth and colouring and well-cut features which his looking-glass represented as his own personal attractions.

There was no earthly reason why the two men should linger after that brief mutual apology. They were strangers. They had come from totally different parts of the world. They had met by pure accident. . . . The chances were that if they had parted then and there they would never have met again. But, for some inexplicable reason, they lingered and began to talk. The ostensible excuse on the part of the big man was that he was a stranger in London, having arrived from the Western States of America a few days before. He asked Tom for some information as to his route along the Embankment, and discovered that, owing to the fog and some misdirection on the part of a precocious match-seller, he was going exactly in the opposite direction to that which he desired.

This discovery led to his walking by the side of Tom Rivers for some distance, and when they reached Charing Cross, they discovered that they were both bound for Piccadilly, and were so pleased with each other that they did not care to part company until it was necessary.

Tom learnt that his new acquaintance's name was Colonel Lawrence—that he had left the army after a good deal of hard work and a great many adventures—that this was his first visit to England—besides getting a good deal of varied information, and the Colonel's impartial opinion of men and things in this effete and old-fashioned country.

An American has the charming quality of perfect frankness. He is cool, he is intelligent, and he is energetic, and he conveys this to you almost as rapidly as he does his impressions of yourself and your surroundings. In Tom Rivers' mood, he could have desired no more welcome companionship. Its novelty roused him to interest, and brought temporory forgetfulness of his suicidal tendency, and the irrational cruelty of womankind as represented by Kate O'Brien. By the time they reached Piccadilly he had begged his new acquaintance to call and see him, and the invitation was accepted as cordially as it was given.

It then occurred to the young man that his own thoughts would be far from pleasant companions that night, and that the "call" might as well take place at once. He managed to convey this to his new friend in a diffident but very frank manner. There was something so boyish and genuine about the

young fellow that Colonel Lawrence felt he was perfectly sincere in what he said, and that he was conferring a pleasure, as well as pleasing himself.

He had knocked about the world so much—had had so hard and strange a life that the most unconventional and extraordinary proceedings would scarcely have afforded him surprise. It did not seem unnatural to him that a mere accidental acquaintance should develop into rapid interest or intimacy.

He was quick at reading character, and something in the troubled look and feverish gaiety of the young man betrayed that all was not well with him. Yet his surroundings afforded no explanation, for his rooms were a revelation of luxury, comfort and convenience to his soldier guest, who had never had the time or the means to trouble about such matters himself.

Tom offered him cigars, wine, mineral waters, but he declined anything to drink except coffee.

"A soldier," he said, "cannot be too temperate. He wants a clear brain and a healthy body. Then the word 'emergency' finds him braced up, ready and dependable. You young men ruin your constitutions with strong drinks and late hours and unhealthy food."

"I daresay we do," said Rivers, who had just given the order for coffee to a little negro boy who served him as attendant valet and general *factotum*. "The 'gilded youth' of England are not as a rule very wise or very virtuous. I read in a book, the other day, that the best possible education a young man could have is to be forced to live on fifteen shillings

a week at an early period of his life. No matter what his prospects may be in the future, he must for one or two years live on that sum, or supplement it by his own exertions. If he has once learnt to do that there's no more fear of him. He will appreciate the value of money and the necessities of less favoured mortals than himself."

"The idea is good," said the Colonel: "you've never tried it, I should say."

"Well, no," said Rivers diffidently; "I never had the chance given me."

"I should say it was a chance you would be in no great hurry to embrace," answered the American dryly.

His eyes wandered round the room, the oak furniture, the well-filled book-cases, the few but rare engravings, the Nankin china and various lounges and seats, all expressive of comfort and artistic tastes.

"I hope you don't think I am quite useless," said Rivers. "I suppose this isn't exactly as much of a 'bachelor's den' as a soldier would fit up, but I'm blessed with such a confounded lot of money," he added as if in apology.

Colonel Lawrence laughed.

"That is scarcely a blessing to deplore," he said, "a great many young men of your age would find it had a few trifling advantages. I suppose you've no profession—except living on your means."

"I'm going into Parliament some day, I hope," said Rivers. "Meantime I . . . well, I look about. I'm not exactly idle. I've studied the grievances of

the working classes, and sympathised with the 'horny-handed Sons of Toil.' I can't say I've found them absolutely interesting, and the tendency to 'beer and 'alf holidays' is very universal, but I hope some day I shall do something for them. Their lives are very hard and very monotonous. One wonders sometimes they are so patient or so loyal."

"Yes, that loyalty to a mere tradition, to a bygone and effete royalty, is a very curious characteristic of you English," said Colonel Lawrence thoughtfully. "It's like bowing to the puppets of a show without ever inquiring what the show is about. And so you're going in for public life?" he added.

"I hope so," said the young man, rising to pour out the coffee. "Unless I turn explorer, and go out to Africa. That's the only place left us, isn't it, that's got any explorable ground?"

"I wouldn't turn explorer if I were you," said Colonel Lawrence. "It's a hard life, and but ill-recompensed. Better stay at home and go into Parliament. I'm afraid I'm rather rigid and old-fashioned, but if I could change places with you, I'd try and make a mark in life while I had youth and energy and health to do it."

Tom Rivers sighed. He was thinking how objectless life had suddenly become, how little satisfaction there would be in making that "mark" of which the American spoke, when no one would care as to its merit or defects—no eyes brighten or grow soft—no lips utter praise or blame. . . . Here he pulled himself up abruptly, and looking at his guest found that he was regarding him with speculative gravity.

"Something gone wrong?" he questioned. The young man coloured.

"What makes you think so?"

"The lack of enthusiasm. The sort of change that came over you when you talked of 'exploring.' A young fellow to whom the gods have been as kind as they've been to you doesn't rush off to foreign lands and the society of savages, unless—shall I put it frankly?—well, unless a woman sends him."

Rivers was silent.

"I knew a young fellow, once, he was very like you . . . you reminded me of him the moment I saw you," continued Colonel Lawrence. "He had very fair prospects, was hopeful, enthusiastic, believed in life as one unending vista of delights. . . . But the end came for all that. It always does. He—he's very much altered now."

He paused, then added abruptly, "She—married some one else."

"Yes?" queried Tom, as he lighted a cigarette. "I suppose I might echo your phrase, 'She always does.'"

"Has it happened, then?"

"No, but it is to happen. I'm not sure that anticipation isn't as bad as certainty."

"Of course, there's no use in saying the experience isn't a new one. We've all got to learn it soon or late. It takes different forms, but the result is the same."

"No," said Rivers. "There's no use and no consolation in saying that. If a man shows you where his leg was amputated and assures you he never

felt the pain—it doesn't console you a bit for having to undergo a similar operation. You've the dread—and the—the inconvenience, to bear for yourself."

"That's so," agreed Colonel Lawrence. An odd shade came into his eyes. He looked at the young man with sympathy as well as pity.

"But it's better to get over it young," he resumed. "It allows room for ambition or a career. You will have a career."

Tom shook his head.

"Oh, yes, you will," went on the elder man. "You can't help yourself. You're not formed to sit down and fold your hands while the battle goes on around you. And such a battle as it is here—in this grim London. If you've thought of it at all as you say—if your sympathies are with the class who toil for others' pleasures, you must feel drawn to do something—be it ever so little—in your time—in your way. Take my word for it, there's more satisfaction in work—hard, well-meant, unselfish work—than in the achievement of personal ambition or personal happiness. I've laid by a fairly big deposit in the Bank of Experience in my time and I am able to speak with authority. If you've wealth, lay it out to the advantage of others. If you look upon it as a trust, you are its master—if you waste or abuse it, you become its slave—and a very pitiful one too."

"But," said the young man, "it isn't always easy to decide what is for the advantage of others."

"I think it wouldn't be difficult for any one who

lived here," said Colonel Lawrence, glancing at the windows, which looked down on the noise and confusion of the busy thoroughfare.

"Even in this short time," he added, "I confess to being saddened and oppressed by the contrasts you meet at every turn—the squalor and splendour—the frivolity and suffering—the terrible woe—the more terrible waste—the flaunting vice—the grim and ghastly wretchedness. One day's experience in the streets of your great city would appal the stoutest heart and sadden the strongest."

"Yes, that's true enough," said Tom sadly. "It's no new thing to hear either. But all that's been done seems useless, and all that has to be done is vaguely and indefinitely postponed. We've legislated, and lectured, and organised, and worked for the poor and the criminal classes . . . and what's the good of it? what better are they?—or what have we gained? Not even gratitude."

"It's because young blood—young life—young energy is wanted in the matter," said the American. "Reform means a wide, strong sweep—not a mere dust disturbance with a feather brush. You are all narrow and artificial and hemmed round by past prejudice and present fears. You know the shibboleth of your political creed, and are content to gabble that so long as you're in office. You're never sincere even in your convictions, and seldom honest even in your decisions. Mind, I don't say my country is any better, or that our senators and presidents work with cleaner hands and honester purpose than your 'wire-pullers.' The world generally is

bad, and the history of civilisation is not encouraging. Whether the fault lies with individuals or the masses, it is hard to say."

"The sweeping reform you advocate would only be the work of time," said Tom thoughtfully. He was interested in his companion's views—sufficiently so to push aside his own personal trouble for the time being. The resolutions and enthusiasms of the past throbbed with returning life. He had laid them aside, been content to forget them for the sake of a girl—a girl who cared nothing for him—who could pass calmly and coldly on to the altar of her fate regardless of the sacrifice of his crushed and broken heart. Better, far better, to fling love aside! Its soft deceits, its perfidies and beguilements. Better, far better, to live for nobler and wider ambitions! Was not love aptly described as a thing apart from man's life? . . . He would prove it so. . . . She should see what she had lost . . . She should learn to be proud of him. She should be forced to contrast him with the silly, witless, aimless fool whom she had selected as her husband. . . . She should—well, there's no knowing how far he might have run on had not the voice of his new friend recalled him to the narrow boundaries of the present.

"You are thinking," he said, "of the woman who in her secret heart will be proud of you. It is not a very noble motive to work upon, but it's better than none. But if she doesn't care for you, personally, she won't be proud. She'll only be graciously indifferent. I suppose you are sure she doesn't care. It's not—pique?"

"No," said Rivers, "it's not pique. There might be some hope then."

He paused and looked at the Colonel.

"I wonder," he said, "how you know."

A grave smile lighted the dark face. "Oh," he said, "it wasn't at all difficult. You're too young to play the hypocrite. It's only love or money that makes the tragedy of youth. I could see it wasn't the last. . . . And yet you were troubled—seriously troubled. I'll tell you frankly now that I didn't like the look of your face when I met you on the Embankment. It had something desperate and reckless about it."

"I felt both," Tom answered in a low, strained voice.

"I was afraid something had gone wrong—very wrong. I did not think you ought to be alone in such a mood—at such a time. There comes the mood and the time in a young man's life when the Tempter has him at his mercy. He is quite defenceless—and quite blind. He doesn't see the danger—he doesn't feel the need of defence—and then—he falls. And all his life—think of that, my boy . . . all his life—he tries to forget that fall, or retrace that false step, and he never can. Then he says, 'If I had known—if I could have foreseen—if I had had a friend——'"

"You know life well," said Tom huskily. "I should fancy you would be a good friend."

"A very true one—and I like youth. It is genuine—it is ingenuous—it is hopeful. I always look with interest at the new lives springing up in the vacant

ranks as the old drop ont. I envy them the hopefulness—the zeal—the enthusiasm they lavish on all and everything they take up. I know it can't last—I know it will be of so very little use—I know that however new the song seems, it is only sung to the same old tune. But, for all that, I like to watch the singer, and hear the fresh voice lending its own enthusiasm to that old song."

He rose then as if to depart.

"It may occur to you," he said, "after I'm gone, of course, that I've been too blunt and too outspoken. But remember, I'm only a rough soldier of fortune, and have only the virtue of perfect frankness. When I said you interested me, I meant it. When I said I read something of your story in your face, I meant it. Now I won't bore you with my company any longer. Only I'll say this, 'Don't despair.' Half the mischief of life and half its sorrows come from some trifling misapprehension, and now—good-night."

He held out his hand, and Tom shook it warmly.

"You've done me no end of good," he said. "I hope you'll come and see me again—very soon."

"I'm staying at the Langham Hotel," said Colonel Lawrence, "and as no friendship in England can possibly be cemented without the ceremony of a dinner, you must come and dine with me there. Shall we say to-morrow? My time is uncertain; I've come to look for a friend. I'm not even sure if—if the person is in London. But that lends a vague charm to the search. Well, shall it be to-morrow? Seven-thirty?"

"I shall be only too glad," said Tom. "The phrase may sound conventional, but, believe me, it is really meant."

"You needn't tell me that," said Colonel Lawrence, looking at him with his grave eyes and kindly smile. "Meanwhile, leave the river alone. You're too young, and life has far too much in store for you, that you should wish to be transformed into what Dickens calls a 'demmed damp most unpleasant body.' She may yet relent, you know."

CHAPTER XXIII.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

"SHE" was very, very far from relenting, if the two people who had been discussing her could only have had the gift of second sight, and glanced at the figure pacing to and fro in the little shabby drawing-room.

Kate had the fiery, impulsive Irish temperament, so quick to love and hate—so passionate in its resentment of outrage or affront. When Tom Rivers had left her she was in a downright towering rage. There is no other word for it—a good, honest, towering rage, that was bound to work itself out before she could calmly or dispassionately consider the matter. But the feeling was too violent to last. The fierce anger which swelled in her bosom seemed to gather in an hysterical sob and almost suffocate her. She threw herself on the couch, and gave way to a tempest of tears which left her weak and faint, but still coldly resentful.

She could never forgive him—of that she felt certain. He was unworthy, ungenerous, contemptible, and yet, try as she might, she could not forget his plea, that love for her had led him to commit those follies, and place himself in so contemptible an attitude. She found herself contrasting the two parts

he had played. . . . She found herself wondering if her own behaviour in the matter of Tom Smith had presented itself in a creditable light to the eyes of Tom Rivers. Instinct had told her the bailiff was not a bailiff, but no suspicion had been awakened at Croft that Tom Rivers was anything but—Tom Rivers.

"And I thought him so honest, so loyal, so true," she said to herself. "The sort of man a woman could respect as well as love. . . . And now—oh, how different it all seems."

She dashed the tears from her eyes, and once again began that stormy pacing of the room which seemed to afford some relief to her perturbed feelings.

She longed for Mrs. Lafaye—for some friend to whom she could speak frankly about the whole miserable, humiliating business. Her father would only laugh, and probably say that the alteration in the position of his creditor made the payment of his debt a matter of secondary importance. And how the memory of that debt rankled in her mind. It had been incurred on her behalf in order that she might be set free to go to Croft. Why, now she came to think of it, her very dresses had been bought with his, Tom Rivers's money, in order that the said Tom Rivers might pursue the acquaintance at his leisure!

No wonder her pride was in arms—no wonder the hot blood burned and flamed in her cheek as she thought of this impertinent wooing—no wonder the dark eyes flashed wrathfully at the remembrance of that outspoken confession—no wonder that she told

herself again and again she would never forgive him. On that point she was still determined—never—as long as she lived!

The only thing she could do was to hasten on her marriage with Sir Wilfred. He was coming up to London in a few days' time. She would tell him then that she was ready to be his wife as soon as he desired. It would be an effectual cure for her brief romance, an effectual answer to Tom Rivers. It would end her father's difficulties and—please Sir Wilfred and his mother. Lady Jocelyn had begged her to let the wedding take place soon. Well—so let it be. There was nothing to hold back for—nothing to hope. The sooner her fate was sealed the better.

Having arrived at this wise conclusion, she dashed aside her tears, went up to her room and wrote a full and particular account of everything to Mrs. Lafaye!

. . . . . .

"Youth finds strange comfort in self-torture," said Mrs. Lafaye meditatively, as she finished reading Kate's blurred, impulsive letter. "Poor girl, she is very much to be pitied, but why will she persist in making bad worse? She's just as much in love with that young man as ever she can be, and yet she seems bent on sacrificing her own life and his on the altar of her wounded vanity. It's of no use to speak to her. I can see that. If I am to be of any service I must see the young man himself—get behind the scenes, as it were."

Then she laughed softly. "He certainly has made

an uncommon fool of himself," she said. "I thought romance and poetry and all that sort of thing had gone out when tall hats and frock-coats came in, but I s'pose human nature will always be human nature, however we dress it up."

Then she laid aside the letter, and sat down, and went into a reflective mood, from which she was only aroused by the sound of the dressing-bell.

She was extremely quiet and subdued that evening, even to the wonder and discomfiture of her enemy, Lady Westmoreland, who laid conversational traps for her in vain. Later on, the cause of this gentle melancholy was announced. Mrs. Lafaye regretted that she must cut short her visit, she had received news—very sad news—from a friend, and that necessitated her immediate return to London.

Lady Jocelyn was quite distressed about it. She was genuinely fond of the pretty, bright American, and knew that her departure meant a reign of dulness and depression. But reproaches and entreaties were quite unavailing. Mrs. Lafaye, with the mournful gentleness that cloaked her own relief, displayed also an amount of resolution that no entreaties could shake, and the next morning she took her lovely self, her wonderful toilettes and her magnificent jewels back to the smoky fogs and muddy streets of the Metropolis. Sir Wilfred had intended leaving by the same train, but the idea of a *tête-à-tête* journey with the fascinating American was too much for his weak nerves. He therefore postponed his departure till the next day, and communicated that fact to Kate by telegram.

He hated writing letters—indeed, as a rule he let his valet do his correspondence for him—but he had hit upon the idea of "wiring" to Kate on every possible excuse. It showed how faithful was his memory, and laid all the blame of misspelt words on ignorant post-office officials. He was charmed with the ingenuity of this idea, a gratification, however, that was not shared by Biddy, who was perpetually being summoned from the lower or extreme upper regions of the house to answer the imperative "rat-tat-rat-tat" of what she called "thim dratted telegram bhoys."

When Mrs. Lafaye reached town she drove to her own suite of rooms at the Langham, and there, in the quietude of her own boudoir, and enjoying the luxury of her own company, shared only by tea and letters, she thought out her scheme for giving this "three-volume" tragedy a happy, if somewhat conventional ending.

In the first place, she must get to know Tom Rivers, and judge for herself what manner of man he was.

She knew his address. She had secured it in a casual way from Sir Wilfred, and with a vague hope that she might have met some of his "people" in the whirl of the past season. In that respect, however, Fortune had not favoured her. His female relations consisted of a mother, who did not go much into society, being elderly and in delicate health, and a cousin, who was of the æsthetic type of girls, and went in greatly for art and literature, but eschewed balls and parties as "frivolous." The redoubtable

Aunt Judy had not come under her ken either, for that lady did not often come over to England, and, when she did, her sole idea of enjoyment was to visit a theatre every night.

Mrs. Lafaye sipped her tea, and reflected on these matters, and wondered whether she might venture on writing to Tom Rivers, and asking him to call on her. From what Kate had told her she thought he would not be likely to misinterpret her overtures, even if they did seem unconventional.

"A king can do no wrong, no more can an American," she said, laughing. "We're privileged to be astonishing."

Having arrived at this satisfactory reflection, she rang for her maid, and ordered her to unpack her trunks, and get out a dinner dress, as she would dine at the *table d'hôte*.

"The black dress, Félicie," she said. "That one with all the jet, and I'll wear some diamonds—not many. And fetch me my writing materials. I want to do some correspondence before I dress."

. . . . . .

When Mrs. Lafaye descended from her own rooms to the public dining-room of the Langham, the first course was just over. She entered with the coolness and self-possession of one to whom the stare of the stranger is a matter of total indifference. The head waiter had reserved a place for her, and conducted her thither with the deference due to a distinguished guest. Some of the private tables were occupied by small parties of twos and threes. As Mrs. Lafaye's jet-laden skirts rustled by one of these tables she was

startled by an abrupt exclamation. The next moment a tall, middle-aged man sprang forward, seized her hands, and in a voice broken and hoarse with emotion was endeavouring to convey to her astonished ears his surprise and delight at this meeting.

The usually self-possessed, brilliant little woman found herself for once speechless and bewildered.

She could scarcely believe it possible that chance should have played into her hands like this—that, after years of waiting, heart-sickness, hopelessness, she should suddenly meet the one friend for whom her heart had longed.

The surprise was almost painful in its suddenness. It robbed her of self-command as well as of speech. After one faltering exclamation she could only stand there with her hands prisoned in that strong grasp, white and trembling like a frightened child.

He, too, big, stalwart soldier as he was, seemed bewildered by the shock her presence had given him, and the commonplace aspect of the attendant waiter, deferentially drawing attention to the lady's seat, was an additional feature in the *tableau.*

Woman-like, Mrs. Lafaye recovered herself first. "It is most surprising," she said—then added rapidly, "When did you come? How long have you been staying here?"

He answered briefly, and she drew her hands away, and smiled up at him in a vague, wistful manner. It was impossible to say much with all those eyes upon them. Yet there was something in her look which comforted him, conveying some sudden sense of nearness which was sweeter than

mere physical nearness, and showed a soft and glad comprehension of all that this meeting promised.

Then she moved on, and took her place. Her position at the long table necessitated her turning her back upon him. But from time to time she heard the deep and well-remembered tones of his voice, and so strange, so sweet a thrill ran through her veins, that it seemed as if life had only just begun to be life with this glad birth of hope.

He seemed to be entertaining a guest. She heard another voice, a young voice, answering and remarking from time to time. Conversation, however, did not seen very brilliant.

As for Mrs. Lafaye, the attentive waiter was heart-broken at her indifference to the delicate and dainty dishes which he offered her from time to time. She either refused them or left them almost untasted on her plate. The meal seemed to her interminably long. The conversation of her neighbours on either side was particularly vapid and uninteresting.

After the ice-pudding had gone round she rose from her seat. Colonel Lawrence, who had been watching her every movement, did the same as she passed his table. She smiled graciously. "I shall be in the drawing-room," she said, and passed out of the room, followed by many admiring and some envious glances.

"A compatriot of yours, Colonel?" said Tom Rivers, who had observed the meeting and the agitation on the part of his host.

"Yes. . . . It is years since I saw her," answered the Colonel. His grave deep eyes had a look of

intense happiness. "It seems singular," he said thoughtfully. "You remember I told you I had come over here on the chance of finding a—a friend—whom I had quite lost sight of?"

"Yes, I remember," said Tom, tossing off his glass of champagne, and wondering whether it was possible to be very deeply in love at forty-five.

"That lady," said the Colonel gravely, "is the friend."

"It was very remarkable your meeting her like that," said Tom. "She is a very lovely woman," he added.

"I think she is," said Colonel Lawrence simply. "I have always thought so, though that is not by any means her greatest charm."

"And I suppose she is rich," continued Tom. "Her dress seemed to convey the fact. How is it all you Americans are so well off? I never heard of a 'poor' American. Are there none, or do they always keep in their own country if they are badly off?"

Colonel Lawrence laughed. "I'm a 'poor' American," he said. "I should play a sorry figure in the list of millionaires. But you're right. It's only the rich ones who travel. The others work until they're rich."

He was on tenterhooks to get away and follow Mrs. Lafaye into the drawing-room. But politeness forbade him to hurry his guest, and he had to sit and listen to his not very brilliant conversation for some time longer.

When they at last adjourned Tom manifested a

desire to visit the smoking-room. Colonel Lawrence excused himself from joining him at the shrine of nicotine in such a palpably nervous manner that Tom began dimly to perceive he was anxious to rejoin the beautiful American widow.

He urged him diplomatically to do so, declaring that he could have his "weed," look at the evening papers, and then join him and be introduced to the lady in question.

The beaming radiance of Colonel Lawrence's face gave ample assurance of the satisfaction this bit of diplomacy afforded. He escorted his guest to the smoking-room and then hurried off to find Mrs. Lafaye. That lady had so far recovered her usual composure that she was a little put out with herself for the self-betrayal of which she had been guilty.

"He mustn't think I'm too pleased," she said, and she buried herself in the biggest *fauteuil* she could find, and became absorbed in a novel.

The ingenuous start she gave when a shadow fell across the page over which her head was bent, and the gravely demure wonderment of her eyes, afforded Colonel Lawrence a little uneasiness.

"Had she not expected him?" he thought. "I—I hope I haven't come here too soon?" he said. "It seemed so wonderful meeting like this. I didn't know you were in England."

"Then you don't read your society papers," she said archly. "For they announced that fact long ago. . . . Have you come to talk? If so, you might as well sit down."

He took the seat she indicated. She was perfectly

composed. He, on the contrary, was nervous and uncertain.

"What have you done with your friend?" she asked presently. "I—I thought you were dining with some one."

"Yes," answered the Colonel in his direct, simple manner. "He is a young fellow whose acquaintance I only made yesterday. I asked him to dine. At present he is in the smoking-room."

"And are you making a long stay in England?" she asked.

"I—I hardly know. I came over with a vague idea of a holiday . . . and a vague hope that I might meet—you. You told me once you would be sure to go to England if ever you were rich—or free."

"You knew that I was free?" she said in a low voice, less steady now than it had been a moment before.

"I knew it," he said gravely. "You do not, I hope, expect me to say I regret the fact, even for your sake."

"No," she said. "Friendship accords frankness, and you were always frank."

"It is a soldier's virtue. I wonder if I might say that I hope the friendship of the past is not quite—forgotten?"

"Do you think it is? Am I likely to be less faithful to its memory than yourself?"

"Oh," he said, "I deserve no credit. I simply could not help it. You see, it isn't my nature to make friends easily. I never had many. It is not surprising I should remember—you."

"I think it is very surprising," she answered, her delicate face bent downwards on the book, whose leaves she idly turned. "I did not treat you well," she added in a lower tone.

"No," he said. "You did not, but perhaps you could not help it."

"I was too cowardly to help it, and then, when it was too late, I knew that your misjudgment was only the natural result"

"Perhaps," he said gently, "I did not misjudge you. Might I not have understood the—reason?"

She coloured softly, then closed the book with some abruptness. "Let us not discuss each other," she said. "I have a horror of analysis, either of character or motive. It is nice to be cheated into believing people are what you want them to be. I am very glad we have met again. You are staying at this hotel, I suppose?"

"Yes—and you?"

"I am a bird of passage. But I make this my headquarters. I've only just returned from the country to-day: I came up on a diplomatic mission which I'm terribly afraid I shall never carry through."

"I should think you might carry anything through, if you once made up your mind to do it."

"It is a love affair," she said, smiling. "Two young people I know are obstinately bent on making themselves unhappy. I am ambitious to play fairy godmother. Do you think I shall succeed?"

"I should say so. Personally, I don't know much about love affairs, but it is odd that my young friend

of to-night is also the victim of an unrequited attachment."

"Indeed," said Mrs. Lafaye with quick interest. "What is his name?"

"Rivers. He's a very nice young fellow. I would like to introduce him to you."

"Rivers—Tom Rivers, is it?" exclaimed Mrs. Lafaye eagerly. "Gracious!—You don't say so. Why, I'm just dying to know him! I came up to London expressly to make his acquaintance. Go and bring him at once."

"I—I hardly think he's finished his cigar yet," said Colonel Lawrence. "Won't your patience last a little longer?"

He was not quite pleased at this sudden enthusiasm. Tom Rivers was young, good-looking, rich, and had interested her. It was always dangerous to interest a woman.

"It will wait, certainly," said Mrs. Lafaye, detecting the perturbation of his mind, and inwardly elated by it. "But I think you are unkind to demand it."

"Then I will go and bring him at once," said Colonel Lawrence, rising from his seat.

The room was rapidly filling now. Any conversation would be more or less of a public nature. Perhaps that thought consoled him for the abrupt termination to his *tête-à-tête*.

Mrs. Lafaye watched the tall figure striding across the room. A little tender smile touched her lips: her eyes were very soft and wistful.

"He's just the same," she thought—"so strong, so simple, so true. I'm sure there isn't another man in

the world like him. How odd that we should meet like this . . . and to think that young man on whom I turned my back was Tom Rivers! . . . Seems to me I ought to have had a magnetic intimation of the fact. And my letter upstairs written to him! Talk of miracles indeed! I do wonder what sort of young man he is. . . . If the Colonel has taken a fancy to him, it speaks well. He is not keen on making friends, or rather he used not to be. Well, I'm glad I left Croft. I could not, even in my wildest dreams, have imagined this evening would have been one of such dramatic purport. I hope I'm equal to the occasion."

She looked equal to any occasion as she sat there, her delicate face bright with colour, her eyes dark and glowing with the mingled excitement and interest that the coming interview promised.

Colonel Lawrence solemnly and briefly accomplished the introduction. His countenance was unmoved, but his eyes were gravely observant. The charm of Mrs. Lafaye's manner, her brilliant smile, her cordial welcome, evidently impressed the young man as they were meant to do.

"It's so odd," she said, "that I should find you here to-night, for I've just come up from the country house where you were staying last week."

"From Croft?" he said eagerly. "You know the Jocelyns then?"

"A foregone conclusion, isn't it," she said, laughing, "or how could I stay at their house?"

"True, that was very foolish. I—I suppose there were a great many people there?

"Lady Jocelyn was entertaining what the society journals call 'a brilliant circle,'" said Mrs. Lafaye mischievously. "It has always been the height of my ambition—as an American citizen—to be one of a 'brilliant circle.' One reads about it you know, and wonders about it, and tries dimly to fathom the extent of its magnificence. But the mind sinks abashed before the reality. At least mine did. It was so very far beyond what I anticipated."

"Surely," said Tom, somewhat puzzled, "you have very brilliant society in America. At least I've always heard so."

"I should have called it brilliant once," she said demurely, "but that was before I had met such representations of the word as Sir Wilfred Jocelyn and —Lady Westmoreland."

Tom laughed. "I see," he said. "Yes, it must be rather a joke for any one who is observant."

"It was an exquisite joke," she said with an air of extreme appreciation. "I have lived on it, dined on it, slept on it for seven consecutive days and nights, and I can still smile."

"Perhaps," said Colonel Lawrence, "Mr. Rivers may have a different opinion of the circle. He had friends among them."

"Oh, I know that," she said demurely. "I heard a great deal about him."

The young man looked at her quickly. She noted he changed colour. "May I ask," he said, "who was kind enough to discuss me?"

"I think it was Sir Wilfred," she said, as she slowly

opened her great black feather fan, and swayed it gracefully to fro.

He bit his lip. "We hadn't much in common. And I think he wasn't sorry to see the last of me."

"And," she went on, as if there had been no interruption, "a young lady who afforded me unending interest. Need I mention the name?"

"I—I can hardly fancy any young lady at Croft would have had any special memory of my unworthy self."

"No?" she questioned. "You do yourself an injustice, Mr. Rivers. There was one, Miss O'Brien. Would you be surprised to hear we struck up a great friendship. Indeed, I have come up to town now exclusively on her account."

"Indeed," stammered the young man. He felt and looked bewildered. There was some hidden meaning in Mrs. Lafaye's looks and words, and he could not imagine what that meaning was.

Mrs. Lafaye turned abruptly to Colonel Lawrence.

"Colonel," she said, with the deepest gravity, "I did not tell you what was the real reason of my visit to England. But I am going to be candid. Ever since my school days I have been possessed by one absorbing soul-engrossing idea to behold—a dungeon—a real historical, good, old gloomy dungeon. Don't smile, Mr. Rivers. We've many great and magnificent institutions in America, but we can't run to dungeons. Now, Colonel, if you will make your way across the room and go to that table by the fireplace you'll find a book of English castles, illustrated. There's sure to be some with dungeons. I'll leave

it to you to select the best or worst. As long as it has a gory history, and is a regular deep, grim, terrible and perfectly authentic place, I'm prepared to go to any trouble to see it. Come back here when you've found out one, and we'll arrange a party and visit it. You've never seen a dungeon yourself, I'm sure, have you?"

"Never," he said, rising to do her bidding, unmoved and obedient as if he had been ordered out on the "war-path."

"I thought not: you'll find them absorbingly interesting—in the illustrations."

CHAPTER XXIV.

TWO EXPLANATIONS.

"MR. RIVERS," said the pretty American the moment the Colonel had departed, "I must speak to you frankly, candidly, without any beating about the bush or nonsense. You'll be surprised to hear that I've actually got a letter upstairs written to you. I wanted to know you: indeed, I had made up my mind that I must know you. Will you attend particularly for a few moments, and I'll tell you the reason."

She had dropped all her airy, graceful nonsense. She was deeply in earnest, and Tom saw it.

"I'm very much flattered at your interest," he said, somewhat stupidly. "I will listen with all the patience you can desire."

"You mustn't misunderstand me," said Mrs. Lafaye. "I daresay I'm very un-English, but there are times in life when one can't afford to study conventionalities. I told you I had struck up a great friendship with Kate O'Brien. I mean it. I'm really, honestly and sincerely fond of her, and she's going to do a foolish and most regrettable thing. She's to marry a man about whom she doesn't care a copper

cent, in order to pique another man about whom she does care a—very, very great deal."

The young man's face had grown strangely white.

"I know she's going to marry," he said. "But why should you think it's out of pique? She—she's not that sort of girl, surely."

"Oh, we're all 'that sort of girl' when we're mad with some one we care for and he's done—well, done something stupid—or reckless," exclaimed Mrs. Lafaye. "Half the marriages are made in haste—or in disappointment. But I'm not going to let Kate O'Brien make a fool of herself if I can help it, and I want you to assist me to prevent her doing so."

"You needn't ask me to do that: I'd give my life for her," exclaimed Tom passionately. "But," and his face grew gloomy, "she's refused me—and sent me away. She said she would never forgive me."

"Oh, a girl's never," laughed Mrs. Lafaye. "I know what that means. Will you put your case in my hands and trust me? I've only got her happiness at stake. I must act promptly and decidedly. Will you trust me?"

"Most heartily. But I confess I'm not very hopeful."

"Well," said Mrs. Lafaye, looking up at him with her laughing eyes, "you've put yourself into rather a queer position, haven't you? Somehow romance doesn't pay in real life as well as it does in a novel. You see we can't fix up our situations to suit our characters, and we can't make the characters act and think as we want them. Now I admire your behaviour immensely. It's just the sort of thing would

appeal to me. It was so delightfully unconventional."

"It was a great piece of folly," he said, colouring. "But I never dreamt of its results."

"Exactly. The observation is strikingly novel. And now, tell me, was Kate *very* angry with you?"

"Terribly. She seemed to think I purposely insulted her."

"That's what she wrote to me," said Mrs. Lafaye thoughtfully. "But Irish people are hot-tempered as well as proud. I suppose you're not above acknowledging she has some faults, or—are they only distinguished virtues in your eyes?"

"I—I can't help thinking she was justified in what she said. You see, I had only one excuse to offer, and that she wouldn't believe."

"You think she does not care?"

"I am sure of it," he said hopelessly.

"When you are older—and wiser, you will not judge a woman by her words, but by her actions. And you will find then how contradictory the two are. That's what makes us seem so puzzling to men."

"Thank you," he said, "for the information. I promise you I will lay it to heart."

"Do," she entreated. "And now as I'm convinced Colonel Lawrence has decided on that dungeon and is coming to give us the imformation, I won't say any more on the subject. But you may trust me to consider your interests."

"I think," said Colonel Lawrence, standing before her as stiff and straight as if suddenly brought to "attention"—"I think that you will find Dumbar-

ton Castle possesses a singularly interesting and commemorative vaultage. I will read you the account of it if you like."

"No, you can describe it," she said lightly. "I hope there are chains there—rusty chains and gaolers' keys that rattle hideously. Those are the things that I should call 'commemorative.'"

"Why this singular taste?" asked Tom, laughing in spite of himself.

"Is it singular? I really can't offer any reason. Simply that the fault lies at the door of early English history. By the by," she added quickly, "you've selected a Scotch castle. Why is that?"

"Its history appeared more interesting," said Colonel Lawrence. "Also, there are very few English castles—with dungeons—that are to be viewed."

"That," she said, "is conclusive. We will go to Dumbarton, Colonel. It's somewhere on the Clyde, isn't it?"

"Yes," he said, "but may I suggest that this is scarcely the time of year to go touring in Scotland."

"Oh," she said lightly, "we will postpone it till the spring or the summer, then. I'm sure you're in no hurry to return to America?"

His looks conveyed that he certainly was not, so long as she chose to remain away from that interesting country, but he only said briefly—

"I am at your service."

. . . . . .

Tom Rivers went back to his rooms that night in a frame of mind that was a delightful combination of hope and anxiety. Mrs. Lafaye had worked this

change in him. It was very satisfactory to find his conduct presented to him in the light that her opinions had presented it. His natural anger, fierce, masculine, and brief, had passed away. He was more ready to excuse Kate now for her misjudgment than to excuse himself for his part in causing it. His old coolness and steadiness came to the rescue, and he felt more than grateful to this unexpected ally who had appeared at so momentous a time. Surely their combined forces could save the girl from this sacrifice of herself. Surely she would listen to reason—persuasion—love.

He sat up for long that night going over all the old ground, and trying to look at himself and his actions from Kate's point of view.

He felt she could not regard him as much better than a fool—a creature of no fixed purpose or principle, and apt to be led away by vague, impulsive motives. She was so firm, so brave, so self-reliant, how could he expect her to understand or forgive him? And yet he did expect both.

He had Mrs. Lafaye to thank for it. And he was young enough to believe in miracles. He therefore went to bed and slept actually soundly and dreamlessly in the full anticipation that something in the shape of a miracle was to happen on the morrow—that he would be forgiven by Kate, reconciled to Kate, and able to woo and win her as he had so fixed a determination to do.

Meanwhile, his new friend Colonel Lawrence had seen him depart with feelings of unmixed joy. He had not approved of his entire monopoly of Mrs.

Lafaye's society, or of her interest in him. The duty of "speeding the parting guest" was a duty for which he felt himself eminently qualified on this special evening, and it was with quite suspicious alacrity that he returned to the drawing-room.

Almost every one had left. Mrs. Lafaye still lingered, however. She was standing by the table which contained the volume of illustrated Castles of Great Britain, and apparently absorbed in the study of "Dungeons." As Colonel Lawrence approached she looked up somewhat eagerly. His face was grave and almost displeased. The expression alarmed her.

"I hope," she said, "there is nothing the matter?"

"Oh, nothing," he said stiffly. "I was merely going to observe I trust you enjoyed your evening."

"There is a suggestion in your voice," she said, "that I ought not to have enjoyed it. But I really have. Your friend is quite delightful—for an Englishman."

"He is a very genuine young fellow," said the colonel, somewhat coldly.

"But don't you think it is a dear little romance?" said Mrs. Lafaye eagerly. "Could any one have imagined that I should meet him in this extraordinary manner?"

"Romance?" said the Colonel, looking somewhat puzzled. "I—I don't understand."

"Why, he is the hero—the other one," explained Mrs. Lafoye. "I told you I was interested in a love

affair that was full of promising complications. The lady is a friend of mine; the gentleman turns out to be a friend of—yours; Isn't it admirable?"

He tugged his moustache and looked at her doubtfully. "Is that really so? Was your interest in the young man purely impersonal?"

"Of course. Why shouldn't it be? You didn't think I had fallen in love with him myself?" she said, laughing.

"What is there so unlikely about your doing so? He is considered attractive, I believe."

"Now, Colonel," she said gravely, "you are speaking in an altogether unfriendly and disagreeable way. And I don't like it, for I want your help and I mean to have it. When you see the girl, you won't wonder at my enthusiasm. She is absolutely charming and lovable, and she has had a most unhappy life—which she is foolishly bent on continuing by an equally unhappy marriage."

Her voice grew softer. She did not look at him now, but at the pages she was idly turning, seeing nothing of their contents. "I feel too much sympathy for—any one—who is condemned to such a sacrifice, not to try and aid them if it is any way possible," she went on slowly. "Surely you might understand that?"

He looked at her quietly, as if reflecting on what her words suggested—as if they had carried him back to the past, and had more power to move him by that fact than by their present attitude.

"Were you so very—unhappy?" he said at last. "You concealed it very admirably."

"Surely," she said, "you do not blame me for—that?"

"No," he said. "I have never blamed you for anything. . . . I have thought always that your heart was in the right place, whatever your actions seemed to convey."

"I hope," she said seriously, "that they never conveyed there was anything anatomically wrong with me. I have always been blessed with perfect health."

"Annette," he said suddenly, "I can't jest. I have suffered too much and I am not—naturally—light-minded. I want you to say you are glad to see me—glad we have met—that the old friendship is not forgotten. Six years in a long time. Six years of silence—and waiting."

She looked up at him quite simply and seriously as a child might have done. "Yes," she said, "a long time—a horribly long time to realise that the world can be—empty."

"Annette," he exclaimed quickly, and then trembled and turned pale. "Did you—find it so?" he asked, his voice low and shaken by a storm of feeling he dared not let loose.

The colour flushed into her cheek and then died out. "Yes," she said. He saw that she was greatly moved. He too had lost all the ordinary composure and self-control of his manner. He glanced round and was not pleased to see that the few people still left at the further end of the drawing-room were watching them with idle curiosity.

"I can't speak to you here," he said huskily,

"and I have so much to say. But I think you understand. . . . Just answer me one question. Did you feel—to-night—that those empty years were over?"

"I felt," she said, "that they were—atoned for. Is that sufficient answer?"

"More than sufficient. . . . Will those people never go? . . . Annette, shut that book. . . . Look at me."

She lifted her lovely eyes, all wet with tears, to the bronzed and soldierly visage that, for her, was the representation of all things noble and good in man.

"Beggars should be humble," he said. "I am very humble. I have so much to ask that I scarce dare ask it."

She glanced quickly round. The group had broken up. The last skirt and the last coat-tail were disappearing through the doorway.

Then she held out both her hands, the colour rushed over her face, and through her tears he saw a smile break with April brightness.

"Have you so much to ask?" she said softly. "More than I have to give?"

He clasped the little hands to his breast, looking down with worshipping adoration at the beautiful uplifted face.

"Let us say good-bye, then, to the empty years," he whispered.

It was a very long and a very tender good-bye. Surely longer and more tender than they deserved, if they had been as cold and unsatisfactory as these two friends would have made them themselves believe.

CHAPTER XXV.

FURTHER COMPLICATIONS.

"MISS KATE," cried Biddy breathlessly, "there's an illigant carriage at the door. Shall I be admitting anybody? Shure! it's jist my luck—with a pail on the stairs—and the drawing-room not half dusted. Ah, drat it! Yez needn't be ringing the bell off. Would it be yer intinded, Miss Kate, payin' a mornin' call?"

"Go and answer the door," exclaimed Kate impatiently. "Perhaps it's a friend who was staying at Croft and promised to call."

"You're 'at home,' thin, Miss Kate?"

"Of course, of course. No one but a friend would call so early."

It was indeed barely eleven o'clock when Biddy ushered a radiant vision in silk and furs into the little untidy drawing-room, and departed to acquaint Kate with the fact that her visitor's name was "Missis Lafee."

The girl flew downstairs on receiving the news.

"You! Is it possible? What on earth has brought you to town so suddenly?" she exclaimed as she embraced the radiant little figure with eager welcome.

"Why, *you*, of course," said Mrs. Lafaye. "I could not rest after receiving your letter. It made me just awfully miserable. Ah, was that the shudder of guilt, or of repentance?"

"Neither," said Kate coldly. "I—I think the room is chilly. Biddy had only just lit the fire."

"I've sent my carriage away," said Mrs. Lafaye, unloosening her furs, "because I meant to have a real good long talk with you. I know Sir Wilfred's coming up later in the day, so I concluded I'd forestall him."

She seated herself by the fire, which was smouldering cheerlessly in the grate, and glanced up at Kate standing erect and graceful before her in her simple dark cloth gown.

"Come and sit down," she said imperiously. "I don't feel on equal terms when you're looking down upon me in that grand style. And I've come to scold you—so I can't allow any airs of superiority."

Kate took another chair, but she did not smile. She was conscious of having behaved wrongly, and yet determined to uphold both her actions and reasons. The first thing she felt necessary was to steel herself against Mrs. Lafaye's fascinations.

"Now," said the pretty American, "I'm going to give you two startling items of news. First, I'm going to be married."

"What!" exclaimed Kate.

"I thought that would surprise you," said Mrs. Lafaye, smiling. "It's a fact. No—it's no one at Croft—nor any of the twenty-five titles graciously offered for my acceptance. It's an old friend——"

"Not—the friend—the man you spoke of, whom you had not seen for so many years?"

"Yes, the same. It's very wonderful . . . and I'm—oh, Kate, I am so happy, I'm almost afraid."

She blushed softly, perhaps from some memory of those "many years" which Kate had recalled, and from which she had parted so tenderly the previous night—perhaps because of that wonderful and entrancing happiness which still had something vague and dreamlike about it.

The girl looked at her, with a little wonder and a little envy. "I am glad you are happy. And so you met after all? Was it not rather unexpected?"

"Perhaps that was why it happened," said Mrs. Lafaye. "He came over to England, and chanced to go to the Langham Hotel. I told you I always kept on my rooms there: of course we met on my return from Croft. But that is only one item of news. Colonel Lawrence—that is the name of my future husband—was entertaining a friend at dinner last night, and, naturally, introduced him to me at the conclusion of the ceremony. Guess who it was?"

Kate's face grew cold and proud. "How should I know? My acquaintances are not numerous."

Mrs. Lafaye regarded her silently for a moment. "If you won't guess, I must tell you. It was no other than Mr. Tom Rivers."

"Well?" said Kate, with studied indifference.

"Can't you get up a spark of animation?" said Mrs. Lafaye piteously. "I thought he was just a lovely young man. I cannot imagine how you

could have been so hard on him. Why, any one—*any one* might be proud to have such a lover. And he does love you, Kate. I could tell that at once. Now you needn't flush up and look indignant. I'm going to assert the privilege of friendship, and speak very plainly."

Kate folded her hands behind her beautiful head and leant back in her chair with an expression of perfect indifference as to what the "privileges" spoken of might entail on herself.

But she did not deceive the acute little American. She knew too much of woman's powers of deception. She knew, too, that the more hurt and tender was the heart, the more determined would be the effort to conceal its suffering. Kate's coldness and preoccupation were assumed, and she resolved to break them down if possible.

"Mr. Rivers—(it would be ever so much easier and nicer to call him Tom, but I suppose I daren't) —as I said before, is a perfectly delightful and genuine young man. There are not many to be met with nowadays," she said. "I can't imagine why you have set yourself against him. Let me recite the case. He fell in love with you at the railway station. He found out by accident that you lived here and were in—let us call it—a pecuniary difficulty. From this difficulty he in a somewhat unorthodox and romantic manner endeavoured to relieve you, keeping his own identity concealed. He has always had a dream of being loved for his own sake alone, not for his wealth. He must be a singularly modest young man to doubt the possibility of such a thing!

Had I been heartwhole—but there—I won't say more. . . . I hope you're listening, Kate. Your expression is, to say the least, not encouraging."

"I was only thinking," said the girl, "how extremely confidential you must have become on such a very brief acquaintance."

"Oh, yes, we did," said Mrs. Lafaye, with intense enthusiasm. "But you seem to forget, my dear, that your letter to me was very communicative. It certainly was not written in the cold-blooded mood you are at present indulging."

"Never mind my moods," said Kate. "I want to hear this important communication of yours."

"Would you care to know in what state Colonel Lawrence found that poor young man?" resumed Mrs. Lafaye. "He was roaming on the Embankment and almost on the point of suicide. There, I hope you feel happy now. It's downright cruelty to treat a man as you've treated him. Colonel Lawrence found him desperate and distraught, and somehow they struck up a friendship and he stayed with him half the night, until he seemed calmer and more composed . . . and——"

"And the next day he went to dine with him," said Kate. "Rather a commonplace ending to the contemplated suicide and despair."

"Well," laughed Mrs. Lafaye, "we live in a very commonplace age, you see. What could the young man do? I suppose you don't begrudge him a grain or two of hope, and even despairing lovers can feel the pangs of hunger in the space of twenty-four hours."

"I don't doubt it."

"Oh, Kate, I should like to shake you! For goodness' sake get up some enthusiasm—or pretend it."

"I fail to see why I should do either."

"Then you don't believe he loves you—that he is loyal, generous, honest, brave—all that a lover should be! How can you think of him and contrast him with that odious—(I can't help it, Kate—he *is* odious)—that odious little baronet, and not see which of the two men is worthiest to be loved. You are doing Tom Rivers a great injustice. You are laying up for yourself a great unhappiness, and all because of your own foolish, mistaken pride. Have I not suffered—do I not know from what I want to save you? . . . Why should you degrade yourself? Why should you wreck an honest man's life for the sake of . . . of an error—an action that I grant you was foolish, but not criminal, and certainly has brought punishment enough with it already."

Her voice trembled, her eyes were soft and humid. She was really deeply moved. She pleaded for more than Kate realised, because Kate was not fully conscious yet of all that an unhappy and unsuitable marriage means to a woman.

There was a long silence. Then the girl looked up—her eyes still proud and bright, though her face had grown very pale.

"We do not look at this matter quite in the same way," she said gently. "It does not seem to me an honourable proceeding for a man to make use of opportunities to find out a girl's position and humiliate her with benefits—to masquerade under an assumed

name and to take advantage of information gained in this secret character, and use it in another."

"But if he loved you? Can't you see how the first false step was quite involuntary? You mistook him for—let us call it the 'Man in Possession.' He naturally played on the part because he did not wish you should suffer the humiliation of finding he was some one you already knew. I think it was very noble—myself. I—I only wish Colonel Lawrence had given me such a striking proof of his affection. I like a struggle before a surrender, but I think your struggle is overdone, Kate. You are fighting against yourself as well as against him."

"Perhaps," said the girl coldly, "you will tell me what cause I have to break off my engagement with Sir Wilfred. Do you think I shall be playing a very noble part? I confess I do not, even if—if I could forgive Tom Rivers——"

"You know you have done that long ago in your heart, but you won't acknowledge it. It must be a very unpleasant reflection. As for playing a part, noble or ignoble, that matters little compared with the sacrifice of two lives. Human happiness is too brief and too precious for us to play fast and loose with it, Kate. Even when we gain it, its stay is very, very short compared with all the pain and all the sorrow that life holds. Better a thousand times that you should confess the whole truth to Sir Wilfred and——"

She started as a knock at the door cut short her words, and Biddy entered almost immediately, bearing a card in her hand.

"I ax your parding, Miss Kate, for interrupting of ye, but there's a man below wantin' to see the masther or yerself. As the masther hasn't complated his toilight I came to yez."

Kate took the card. There was only a name on it, "Sir Wilfred Jocelyn," and pencilled underneath her father's name.

"What does it mean?" she exclaimed. "Who brought the card?"

"A porter-man, one o' thim chaps as wear the caps with bands round thim," said Biddy.

Kate turned somewhat pale. "Perhaps I had better go and see him," she said, rising from her chair. "Is he in the hall, Biddy?"

"Shure an' he is, Miss. It's not in the dining-room I'd be axin' the likes o' him."

"Run down and see what he wants," said Mrs. Lafaye. "I'll wait here and talk to Biddy."

It was some minutes before Kate returned. She was very pale, and trembled greatly. "Something terrible has happened," she said. "The man was a porter from Waterloo. There has been an accident on the line. . . . Some of the passengers were brought on. . . . One of them was very badly injured and taken to an hospital. They had no clue as to who he was, but this card was found on him. . . . I'm afraid it is Sir Wilfred. I must ask my father to go round at once and see."

She left the room. Mrs. Lafaye rose and looked at Biddy, and that faithful and intelligent person looked at her.

"Would it be Miss Kate's intinded she's maning, ma'am?" she asked.

"Yes—Sir Wilfred Jocelyn. How strange. . . . how fateful it seems," murmured Mrs. Lafaye.

"Strange is it? And no wedding, and Miss Kate may be a widdy before she's a wife. Shure, 'tis the bad luck that's on this house and the people in it. Ah, why wasn't he contint to stay where he was, the poor gintleman, and kape to his telegrams. Shure, he wouldn't be where he is at this blessed minnit if he'd done that. Ah, what will we all do now, at all, at all?"

"He may not be seriously injured," said Mrs. Lafaye. "Accidents like that are not always fatal, Biddy."

"The saints forbid, ma'am! but shure, if he's in one o' thim hospitals the surgeons will be taking off an arm or a leg of him before any frind can step in to prayvint it. And then where'll he be, poor sowl? And it's not Miss Kate we'd be willing to see marrying a cripple. She's so proud and so beautiful."

"And just because she is so proud and so beautiful it's the very thing she'll be likely to do," almost groaned Mrs. Lafaye.

She felt that Fate had not served her purpose at all. Kate could not possibly break off her engagement now. It would look so mean, so unwomanly. The affair in which she had interested herself so warmly began to assume an air of complication that defied disentanglement. All her pleasantly vague ideas as to the possibility of smoothing matters, or

of reuniting those two obstinately unhappy lovers, had received an unexpected check.

Sir Wilfred, all unconsciously, had done just the very best thing for himself, but in doing it he had written "Failure" across the whole of her plans.

. . . . . .

Kate meanwhile had gone to her father's dressing-room. She found him reclining on a couch, attired in a flowered silk dressing-gown, and lazily smoking a cigarette while glancing over the morning papers. He looked up at Kate's hasty entrance.

"Anything the matter?" he asked, as he saw how pale the girl was.

"I am afraid so, papa; a railway porter came around just now to say there had been an accident on the line near Waterloo. Sir Wilfred was in the train. They found our address on his card and came here to say he had been taken to the St. Thomas's Hospital. . . . The man said he was seriously injured. You must go off at once and see him."

"What a nuisance!" exclaimed O'Brien languidly. "Really, something ought to be done to these railway companies . . . endangering people's lives as they do. But perhaps he's not seriously hurt, Kate. The man, of course, wouldn't know the extent of his injuries."

"He said 'badly hurt,'" said Kate. "Do make haste, papa, and get dressed. Could I go with you?"

"My dear child," he answered pettishly, "you know I hate being hurried. I haven't even shaved yet, and I sha'n't be dressed for fully three-quarters

of an hour. As for your going—well, no. An hospital isn't exactly a nice place for a lady to go to; and more especially the accident ward. It is really very unfortunate—very unfortanate. I have the most confounded ill-luck, I must say."

He spoke as if Sir Wilfred had purposely victimised himself in order to put him to personal inconvenience.

Kate said nothing, only busied herself in putting out the various articles of dress he would require, in the hope of expediting his movements.

Still grumbling, Cornelius rose and rang for his shaving-water. Biddy appeared with it, accompanied by a pair of new patent leather boots, which she presented to her master with the information that the man who had brought them wished to know if he should wait for the money.

"If he is at a loss how to waste his time—certainly," said Cornelius, laughing. "But if it is of any value—most decidedly not."

Kate looked scornfully at the new purchase.

"You have six pairs already," she said. "Isn't it about time you paid for one at least?"

"Yes," acquiesced her father, "quite time. Some people say 'Time is money.' I never found it so. I give plenty of it to my creditors, but they don't seem to consider it an equivalent for common currency. Now, my dear, are you particularly anxious to watch the process of shaving—because it is about to commence."

"You will be as quick as you can, won't you?" pleaded the girl. "Mrs. Lafaye is downstairs, and

she is also very anxious to know the extent of the accident. I will keep her till you return."

"Your charming American friend," he exclaimed eagerly. "Has she found us out already? Do you think you could borrow a fiver from her?" he added. "I'm devilish hard up, and there's sure to be tips and fees and things at the hospital. Try it—there's a good girl."

"I shall certainly *not* try it," exclaimed Kate, angrily. "I think you have no right to ask such a thing of me. I have endured enough humiliation of this kind. I will have no more of it!"

"Then you had better pray Sir Wilfred may not be approaching his 'latter end,'" said Cornelius coolly. "If he was to die I don't know what would happen to us. A case of leaving the country without the ceremony of leave-taking."

Kate sighed wearily, and left the room without further remark.

She found Mrs. Lafaye flitting about the drawing-room in restless agitation.

"This is very upsetting and dreadful," she said. "Is your father going to the hospital?"

"Yes, of course," said Kate. "I hope you can stay till his return. I can offer you some sort of luncheon."

"I don't want any luncheon," said Mrs. Lafaye. "I'm due at the Langham for that at 2 P.M. But I will stay willingly. If I hadn't sent away the carriage we might all have driven to the hospital and heard the news much sooner."

"We shall hear it soon enough," said Kate. "I'm afraid it can't be very good."

They resumed their seats and indulged in desultory fragments of conversation, until Cornelius O'Brien appeared. His attire was a suitable compliment to the occasion, being of a chastened and half-mourning description, where colour came into play merely in the shape of tie and gloves.

His pleasure at seeing Mrs. Lafaye was tempered by judicious remembrance of the melancholy business before him, and he promised to return as speedily as possible with news of the unfortunate baronet.

To Kate O'Brien that hour of waiting was a miserable and anxious time. When the cab-wheels were heard, and the latch-key in the door announced her father's return, she turned so white that Mrs. Lafaye feared she was about to faint.

Cornelius entered, alert and cheerful as ever. "It's all right; you needn't look so anxious, my dear," he said, as he saw his daughter's pale face. "Only a fractured knee. The surgeons say he can be moved in two or three days, so we'll have him here, and you shall nurse him back to health again. Quite a charming episode in the monotony of courtship. Eh, Mrs. Lafaye?"

"I suppose it is," said that lady reflectively. "One can enjoy anything if one rigorously applies oneself to do it. I should not consider sick-nursing a very charming background to courtship myself. But perhaps my tastes are eccentric."

The silent suffering of the girl's face touched her deeply. After her father's information she said no

more, only sat there gazing into the fire, unheeding even the light badinage and cross-questioning going on between Cornelius and the pretty widow.

Mrs. Lafaye rose at last to take her leave.

"I'll come again to-morrow," she whispered. "And try and cheer up, my dear—don't look so miserable."

. . . . . .

Cornelius O'Brien took her down to her carriage with that "grand air" which sat so naturally upon him and left so pleasing an impression on those of the fair sex whom he favoured with its courtesies. Mrs. Lafaye, however, distrusted it, and him. Mentally she summed him up as "a humbug," and would have rejoiced to tell him so, but her feeling for Kate counselled diplomacy, and the thought did not commit her to the rashness of utterance.

She knew it would be unwise to hint at her scheme while it was in its present unripe stage. From a moneyed point of view Tom Rivers was quite as good a match as Sir Wilfred Jocelyn, though he would not be likely to prove so weak a tool in the hands of his father-in law. This new complication of matters was, however, seriously disturbing. It was hardly possible that Kate could break off her engagement when Sir Wilfred was ill and helpless and dependent. No, it must go on, and they would have to wait the turn of events with that patience they could. She brooded over every possible and impossible aspect of the affair during her drive back to the hotel, and her pretty *riante* face looked almost melancholy as she walked through the stately entrance hall

where Colonel Lawrence was awaiting her arrival with pardonable impatience.

"How grave you look. Has anything happened?" he exclaimed in alarm.

"Yes," she said, giving him her hand. "A great deal has happened. My pretty scheme is all knocked on the head. That wretched little baronet has met with an accident, and is to be nursed back to health and strength by his *fiancée*—thereby investing himself with additional interest and riveting a claim which I had hoped was only a conditional sort of thing. Isn't it hard on my poor Kate?"

"And on my poor Tom," he said with mock seriousness. "What is to be done now?"

"We will have lunch together, and talk it over," she said, laughing. "I am quite exhausted. You have no idea what I have gone through this morning."

"I have been endeavouring to compassionate myself," he said gravely. "I had no conception before this morning that three hours possessed something under five thousand minutes. That is what they represented. So I haven't much pity left for you."

"Of course I did not mean to be away so long, but I felt obliged to wait until I heard the result of the accident."

"Am I expected to get up sympathy for that also?" he asked.

"You are not expected to be anything but genuine —by me," she said, glancing up with her pretty smile.

"I am glad of that. Now let me hear the story—though I would far rather talk about ourselves."

"Oh," she said graciously, "there will be plenty of time to do that when we've made these two young and foolish creatures as happy as—we are."

"I am glad you are hopeful as well as complimentary. Am I to be honoured with an introduction to this charming Kate of yours?"

"Certainly. I'll take you there to-morrow if you like. It's rather trusting of me, for she's very lovely. And . . . I believe you admire tall women. Don't you?"

"Yes," he said, "I admire them. They set off a dress, a room, a landscape. Probably if I were five foot two or thereabouts I should fall in love with a giantess."

"Kate is splendidly tall," said Mrs. Lafaye. "I look a pigmy beside her."

"Then I shall not admire her," he said. "Because every feeling of that sort is at present absorbed by what you please to call—a pigmy."

"That is very subtle flattery. Allow me to draw your attention to the fact that there are some cutlets at your elbow, and though you may not be conscious of an appetite—I am."

He laughed, and applied himself to assisting her to the dish in question, while she told him the story of the railway disaster.

He was almost surprised at the eager way in which she had thrown herself into this matter. For his own part he did not believe in the possibility of playing *Deus ex machina* in love affairs. They

were best left alone, or to that settlement, whether of chance or fate, which either terminated or advanced them. Still, he listened and sympathised, partly for her sake, partly for that of Tom Rivers, to whom he had taken a sincere liking.

The conversation during luncheon-time was quite impersonal. They were both the objects of a good deal of attention and notice, and were quite aware of the fact. It did not suit Mrs. Lafaye to take the hotel or its visitors into her confidence, and most certainly it was not in Colonel Lawrence's nature to be sentimentally obtrusive. They both indulged in an inward consciousness of perfect happiness and perfect comprehension, to which their light talk and jests were only a background. So the onlookers gained nothing by their observance, except a renewed conviction that American women were all froth and sparkle, and couldn't speak a sentence without laughing.

This assurance was all the satisfaction they could derive from observing the stride this friendship had made since the meeting of the previous night.

Then they went their several ways, opining that the American widow was a dreadful flirt, but mitigating the severity of their judgment by the saving clause that her gowns were "just a dream," and must have cost a small fortune.

So Mrs. Jackson Lafaye ought to have been a very happy woman!

CHAPTER XXVI.

"I HAVE COME TO SAY GOOD-BYE."

TOM RIVERS was pacing his room in a restless and perturbed fashion that evening when Colonel Lawrence was announced.

The eagerness of the young man's welcome was tempered by the surprise the visit occasioned. The Colonel alluded to the fact as he rapidly explained it. "Of course you didn't expect me. But Mrs. Lafaye made me come round: she thought you'd expect to hear something."

"She's awfully kind," said Tom gratefully. "I must confess I was rather tired of my own company. But I scarcely hoped for this pleasure."

"Well, I'll relieve you of the burden of solitude," said the Colonel, "and I'll deliver my message to the best of my ability. You see I'm new at this business, and I'm afraid I'm not quite the sort of person to act as an emissary of Cupid. However, I'll do my best not to blunder."

He sat himself down and accepted a cigar. Then he related in a few plain, brief sentences the events of that morning.

The young fellow's face clouded unmistakably as he heard of Sir Wilfred's plight.

"Of course it will be all up with my chance now," he said. "He'll stay at their house, and be nursed by Kate—confound his luck!—and then pity and sentiment and that sort of thing will come into play. You know what women are—if a fellow's ill and helpless they can't do enough for him. She'll think she's bound in honour now to keep her engagement."

"Well," said the Colonel dryly, "I may be wrong and old-fashioned in my idea, but it seems to me she was equally bound to keep it before this accident happened, if she had given her promise to do so."

"But don't you see—hasn't Mrs. Lafaye explained—that she was driven into this d—d engagement? She dislikes the fellow, but her father worried her into it, and then, unfortunately, I—offended her. If she had been free to act as she pleased, nothing of this sort would have happened."

"Well, it has happened," said Colonel Lawrence. "And now, it has assumed quite a complicated appearance. I confess I do not understand women, but it seems to me that Miss O'Brien has voluntarily brought herself into this predicament, and that you cannot assist her in any way by interference."

It was strange and sad to see the look that came into the young man's good-looking face, changing it into something hard and cold and almost cynical. "No doubt you are right. It would be a thousand times better if I gave up this wild hope. . . . And after all, perhaps she doesn't care—she as good as told me."

"Oh," said the Colonel unwisely, "I think she—cares. But you must ask yourself whether it would

be quite right, or honourable, on your part to pursue the subject. If she chooses to keep her engagement I must say I should not blame her. Mrs. Lafaye thinks differently, and you of course have an interest in her freedom, however it might be procured. But though she has acted foolishly she—at present—has determined on taking the full consequences of that action. Does the affair present itself hopefully to you now?"

"No. How can it?" said Tom gloomily.

"She is a young lady, as far as I can judge, with a very firm will and very decided opinions. I should think she could get a good deal out of life, if she chose, and no doubt she will choose. Do you know that if you were my son, I should counsel you to leave her to herself, and go your own way."

"If counsel were as easy to accept as it is to give," said Tom, "how wisely we would all act. You see, Colonel, this means a great deal to me—more than I can afford to say. It is not only my happiness that she is wrecking, but her own. . . . If you saw that little drunken, half imbecile baronet, and then contrasted him with that beautiful, proud, queenly creature, you would know what a terrible sacrifice it was—and what a senseless one."

"Women," said the Colonel sententiously, "seem fond of sacrifices."

"God help the men who try to understand them," said Tom bitterly.

"Perhaps," said Colonel Lawrence, "if you tried to convince yourself that they are not worth understanding, it might make it easier for you."

"Nothing will make it easier," said the young man, more gloomily. "Nothing. I can't hope for that."

"You are very young, my boy, to taste so bitter a draught of unhappiness. You haven't arrived at that stage of life when the conscience and the emotions are too deadened for suffering to affect them very keenly."

"It must be an enviable stage to arrive at," said Tom. "Have you reached it, may I ask?"

"Reached it, and passed it," answered Colonel Lawrence. "And now, in the autumn of my days, I am going to have my reward."

Tom looked at him keenly. "I—I think I understand," he said. "I thought that meeting last night meant a great deal for you."

"It had meant all I had to live for, hope for, look forward to, for six long years," said the Colonel, with an unforced and simple pathos that made no effort to mask its depth of feeling.

"Six years!" echoed Tom drearily. "I wonder what they will do for me? I wonder how I shall live through them?"

"I think it would be better to reflect upon what you will make of them. This—disappointment—shall we call it that?—won't make you a worse man if you brace yourself up to bear it."

"I am glad you are going to be happy," said Tom, regarding him with a new interest. "It is Mrs. Lafaye, of course? Yes, I thought that at once. She is charming, and so lovely! What a wonderful ending to your romance, Colonel!"

"It is a Heaven-sent one," he said reverently. "I can hardly believe in it yet."

"I think you must be two wonderfully unselfish people," said Tom. "Here you are both interesting yourselves in another love affair instead of being exclusively absorbed in your own. Is that an American idiosyncrasy?"

The Colonel smiled. "I cannot say. But I have been swept away on the current of Annette's enthusiasm, and cannot help sharing in it for your sake also."

Tom rose, and began to pace the room. "It's no use hoping against hope," he said gloomily. "Mrs. Lafaye has done her best to make amends for my folly, but I can see it is useless—now. I haven't even a fair field for fighting. There seems something mean in taking advantage of that unfortunate fellow's accident. Fate has favoured him. I had better retreat gracefully, and resign myself to the inevitable."

"I think you would be wise," said Colonel Lawrence gently.

He had not carried out his mission at all as Mrs. Lafaye had directed. He had been told to encourage Tom, to bid him hope still—above all, to give him that grain of comfort contained in Kate's relenting attitude of the morning. He, however, judged it wiser to discourage hope instead of assisting it, and he mentioned nothing about Kate's inclination for forgiveness. "Do you know what I would advise you to do?" he continued, after a brief silence. "To go away from here altogether. Travel, study life, and manners, and people. You have plenty of

money ; you are not hampered by professional or business engagements. You will be all the better for a change of that sort. Here you move too much in one groove. Try a year or two of the life I recommend. Go to the States to begin with. The bustle and energy, the widely different elements of life and society, the novelty and immensity of everything you will meet with—all this will be a wholesome change. I don't say it will cure you, but it will keep you from brooding over your disappointment. Besides, it will be of immense service to you in the future if you intend to go in for a parliamentary career. To study our Republic is a liberal education."

He spoke with just pride and contentment. He had all an American's gratified and wondering admiration of America. He was not blind to his countrymen's faults, and he did not declare them to be virtues in disguise, but for all that he considered that they were a great nation and fit to be the wonder of all others.

His enthusiasm did not affect Tom very materially just then. The young fellow was too disheartened and too seriously unhappy to dream as yet of consolation.

He could not afford to deceive himself, and he knew that he was a long way from anything like peace or resignation. But he encouraged the Colonel in his enthusiasm, and he listened and tried to believe the novelty and the marvels he heard of might prove as "balm of Gilead" to his aching heart and wounded pride.

So Colonel Lawrence left him at last and went back to assure Mrs. Lafaye that he had carried out his mission most successfully, and that Tom Rivers was "braced up" to meet the worst.

. . . . . .

Meanwhile Kate waited with a sort of despairing patience for the arrival of her suffering swain.

The best bedroom in the house had been prepared, and an hospital nurse engaged—much to Biddy's disgust—and in due time an invalid carriage made its appearance containing the shattered frame of the unfortunate baronet.

Lady Jocelyn came up to town on hearing of the accident, but having assured herself, and been assured by Cornelius O'Brien, that every possible care and attention would be given to the invalid, she returned to Croft and to the guests who still lingered there.

Sir Wilfred was not a good patient by any means. His enfeebled constitution and irritable temper were against him, and his inability to find occupation or amusement in the uninteresting surroundings of a sick-room made the task of nursing him very trying. He hated books, and the only literature to which he would listen was contained in sporting papers and comic journals.

These Cornelius or Kate would read to him with persevering patience, but after a time he wearied even of their exciting contents, and would grumble and complain like a fretful child at his enforced inaction. The fractured leg showed an obstinate deter-

mination not to heal, and the doctors began to look very grave as time went on.

Kate grew daily more pale and thin and quiet; and Mrs. Lafaye, who called with unfailing regularity every morning, was seriously distressed at the change in the girl. The obligations under which Sir Wilfred placed them by his contributions to household expenses were a galling humiliation to her proud spirit. She knew her father had put the matter in his usual airy and irresponsible manner before his prospective son-in-law, and that the baronet had at once placed a considerable sum to his credit, so that the genial Irishman once more rejoiced in the possession of a banking account, and the wheels of expenditure rolled smoothly along over a roadway of renewed credit. For it was a curious phase of Cornelius O'Brien's character that he never could bring himself to pay for anything unless absolutely compelled to do so. If he had possessed a rent-roll of unlimited thousands he would still have run up bills, and incurred debts, and resented being asked for payment as the greatest impertinence of which any tradesman could be guilty.

Kate gave up the task in despair, and was thankful when she managed to secure some small sum now and then to satisfy a demand that threatened to become importunate, or to stave off a summons by that sop to Cerberus which is known as "something on account." She ventured to ask Cornelius once if he had paid off the debt to Tom Smith. He only laughed. "Faith, he's never asked for it, and besides, I don't know his address," he said.

Kate felt very indignant—the more so as her father seemed perfectly ignorant as to who his creditor really was.

Mrs. Lafaye had not mentioned Tom Rivers for some time, and the girl was too proud to ask for news of him. Perhaps the little American judged rightly when she resolved to let matters alone for the present, feeling sure that Kate's resentment would wear itself out, as indeed it was fast doing.

One evening she came into the drawing-room after an unusually trying day. Lady Jocelyn had been there—worrying and fussing the whole household about her darling boy. There had been a consultation of doctors, with the usual results—that is to say, fees to themselves, vague hopes and wordy explanations to the patient's friends—and no material benefit to the patient himself. She had gone through all this and now Lady Jocelyn had left. Cornelius had departed to seek consolation at his club, and Sir Wilfred had at last ceased whining and grumbling and fallen into a feverish and uneasy sleep. Utterly wearied and broken down, the girl left the sick-room in charge of the nurse and descended to the drawing-room.

A couch was drawn up near the fire. The lamp was lit and shone on the somewhat bare and comfortless aspect of the room. A basket of hyacinths and lilies, which Lady Jocelyn had brought up from Croft, stood on a small table, and their faint, sweet perfume filled the air with fragrance.

The girl sank down on the couch with a sigh of intense fatigue. Her face looked strangely white

and thin against the crimson cushions, her clasped hands fell idly down on the black folds of the dress she wore, and the firelight gleamed on the flashing diamonds of the betrothal ring which fitted the slender finger so loosely now.

"It would be very foolish and very useless to cry," she thought as she lay there. "But if I were not so tired, I think I could do it."

The clock struck seven, she found herself counting the strokes, and wondering in some vague, dim way how it was that it seemed such a long time since seven that morning. She had been awake then, and——

Suddenly she seemed to wake as from a long sleep or stupor, conscious only of overpowering weakness. Her forehead was wet and her hair clung damply about it. She tried to raise herself, and then sank feebly back. Some one was bending over her, speaking. At any other time she would have been surprised; now it did not seem strange that she should be looking back to the anxious face and remembered eyes of Tom Rivers.

"Don't move," he said, "you must be very weak. I found you lying here in a dead faint."

She had no desire to move or speak for a moment. She could not even think clearly or ask herself how this young man had come here, and what could have been his reason.

"I took the liberty of asking your servant to bring you a glass of wine," he continued hurriedly. "She tells me you have eaten nothing all day. How can

you be so foolish? . . . Why doesn't some one look after you?"

His voice roused her to some effort. "I believe Biddy is right," she said. "I did not care for luncheon, and my father dined out and—then I forgot——"

"Here is the wine," he said, as Biddy entered. "Let me see you drink it."

She held out her hand and took the glass. He looked at her, but the tired whiteness of her face and the strained steadiness of her uplifted eyes were a shock for which he was unprepared.

"My God!—Kate!" he cried below his breath, "what have you been doing to yourself?"

She drank the wine before she attempted to answer. For the first time in her life she knew she had a hard part to play, and had almost lost the strength and the power to play it.

"You may go, Biddy," she said as she gave back the glass. "I am all right now. Make some strong coffee and bring it up here as soon as possible."

The door closed. She turned and looked at her visitor.

"To what do I owe this—honour?" she said.

His white face flushed slightly at her tone.

"I came—I ventured to call to say good-bye," he said, "I had no right to, I know . . . but somehow I couldn't help it——"

"Good-bye?" she faltered. "Why, are you going away?"

"Yes," he said quietly. "I sail to-morrow for America."

CHAPTER XXVII.

"OH, SO UNWISELY WISE."

KATE lay back against the cushions, and echoed those words in a faint whisper. "To America . . . you are going to America?"

"Yes," he said.

He had moved a little distance away from her and stood leaning against the mantelpiece, his eyes bent on the fire. He could not trust himself to look at her. The change in her appearance had been a greater shock to him than his self-command could bear just yet. The proud, beautiful, queenly girl he had seen scarce three weeks ago could hardly be identified with this pale suffering woman who seemed aged by years since that parting.

"Is it not rather a sudden determination?" she said presently.

"I suppose it seems so," he answered, "though to me it is quite an old and long established idea."

"I wonder," said Kate, "that Mrs. Lafaye did not mention it to me."

"Oh," he said bitterly, "Mrs. Lafaye could not possibly believe that any action of mine could interest you."

The hot hurt flush on her white cheek might have told its own tale. She made no other answer.

"I felt suddenly, to-night, that I should like to see

you once more before I left England. I should like to ask you to forgive what I now see was both foolish and impertinent," he said presently. "I know I've no right to any sort of consideration from you, but it wouldn't be very much for you to put your hand in mine and wish me God-speed, would it, Kate?"

He looked at her then, and that change in her face, and the quiver of her pale lips as they parted to speak to him, had something about them so unfamiliar and so pathetic that his self-command was sorely taxed.

"No," she said faintly. "It wouldn't be much. I am glad you came."

In this new attitude of humility, in her pallor and weakness and suffering, she touched him as she had never done in her beauty and brilliance. She could have found no weapon so powerful, had he come there for combat. The first look of her face had disarmed him.

"You are very good to say so," he cried with a passion of gratitude. "I—I never expected it. You would laugh if you knew how many times I passed and repassed your door before I had the courage to ring."

"Am I as formidable as Petruchio's Katherine?" she said with a faint smile.

She was wishing he would not look at her. It unnerved her, and she knew that neither face nor voice were well under control to-night.

"To me, yes," he said. "You must confess our interviews have been somewhat—stormy."

"This will be an exception, then," she answered. "You see I am not mentally or physically capable of doing battle."

"How have you let yourself get into this state?" he said.

"I—I don't know," she answered wearily. "One doesn't feel things at the time. I fancy I have been anxious and troubled. . . . But it is nearly over now. I shall soon be all right again."

His brow darkened. It was not pleasant to think that anxiety for a rival should have produced this change in her. "How is—Sir Wilfred?" he said with effort.

"I think he is better," said Kate. "Only the doctors say it will be a long time before he can walk."

"Surely there are plenty of people to take care of him without your knocking yourself up," said Tom stormily. "What is your father thinking about? Can't he see the change in you?"

"I assure you," she said with a faint smile, "you exaggerate the change, as you call it. I am only tired to-night, and as I said before I stupidly forgot to order dinner. I think I hear Biddy with the coffee. You will see that I shall be quite myself when I have had a cup."

She rose to a sitting position, and Biddy placed the coffee service on a small table near the couch, and arranged cakes and bread and butter beside it.

Tom watched Kate as she poured it out. Her hands were trembling, but he did not offer to help her. He left somehow that he could not trust him-

self. This was not the scene he had imagined. This frail, wan girl had not the least likeness to the passionate tragedy queen from whom he had parted in this very room three weeks ago. She filled two cups and held out one to him. "I forget," she said, "if you take sugar?"

She lifted her eyes as she said it, and the look they met suddenly swept aside her assumed composure. What it revealed, or how it revealed it, she could never clearly have said, only that something of his sufferings, something of the weariness and pain of those past weeks, flashed out like spoken words. She saw a change in him that had robbed him of youth and peace, and left but manhood's patient sadness in their place, and she saw too that there was more than pity in his eyes—there was the dumb misery of a hopeless love—laid aside, but unconquered still.

She laid down the little silver tongs. Not for worlds could she have lifted them now, or performed that simple action which the answer to her question involved. He came a little nearer, and lifted the tongs and put in the sugar in a slow, deliberate fashion. He saw that she was moved, but the look in her eyes had been a revelation to him. He felt that the sorrow of this parting was no longer a sorrow unshared, and the dangerous sweetness of that thought kept him silent. . . . If he broke that silence, if he saw again those uplifted eyes, unconscious of their self-betrayal, and sweet as they had never yet been sweet because of the shadow of regret that lived for him, he felt he should play the traitor in speech as in thought.

Kate raised her cup to her lips with unsteady hand and drank its contents.

He brought her the plate of cakes. "You must eat," he said in a matter-of-fact voice that sounded strange and hard. "It is absurd to think you can bear the wear and strain of sick-nursing without keeping yourself up. But women are such unreasonable creatures."

The change in his manner affected her. She saw that whatever they might both feel, the resolve to betray nothing in speech was a mutual resolve. Without a word she took what he gave her. The blanched look left her face, and some natural colour came back to her lips.

"I suppose we are unreasonable," she said in answer to his remark. "But I have been obedient now. And I feel really much better."

"I wish I could say you looked it. You had better lie down again. Let me arrange your cushions for you—and then, I will leave you to rest."

She let him do as he wished, though his deft and gentle touch set every nerve quivering. The one thought in her mind was that it could not last much longer—he would soon go, and then she might give way as she pleased.

She leant back against the cushions, and a little tired sigh escaped her. Tom regarded her silently, and then moved the table away and took the chair beside her couch.

"I suppose," he said, "I am only boring you by staying here, but it will be a long—long time before we meet again. When I last saw you, you told me

you would never forgive me. I—I felt to-night I could not leave England with those words ringing in my ears. I told you why I came. . . . If you could just say what I asked you, I should start a happier man for hearing it. Am I asking too much?"

"No," she said. "It is very little at—at such a time."

Her gentleness was harder to bear than her scorn or anger had ever been.

"I am not going to offer any plea or any excuse for what I did," he continued hurriedly. "The time has gone by for that. It often takes a man's life to expiate a boy's folly. I can't pretend even now, Kate, that I can alter—or forget you. If I had only known—if I had only gone straightforwardly to work. But what use to speak; if regrets ever came till too late, there would be no such thing as a regret in the world!. . . I hope you will be happy. . . . I can still find it in my heart to wish that, only——"

His voice broke, he could not continue. All he had lost, all he had hoped, swept over him in a flood of bitter memories. The young haggard face on which the firelight fell told her its own tale of suffering.

"There is no need to wish me anything," she said, "and no use. I shall not expect happiness, perhaps I do not believe in it. But I see my life mapped out before me, and no doubt it will not be harder than it has been. Don't speak about me any more: tell me of yourself, your plans. I think America is the best place you could go to, if—if you still intend to adopt a political career."

"Yes, I still intend it, some day, and according to Colonel Lawrence—do you know Colonel Lawrence?"

"Not personally. I have heard a great deal about him from Mrs. Lafaye. He seems a sort of hero, according to her."

"He is a splendid fellow," said Tom enthusiastically. "But for him I—I don't know what would have become of me. Well, according to his advice, America is *the* country to be studied and admired. I am prepared to do both. I shall have plenty of opportunity—and plenty of time."

"You intend to make a long stay there?" she said rather faintly.

He rose then, somewhat abruptly, and pushed the chair aside.

"Yes, a long stay. And now, Kate—that word of forgiveness you promised me?"

He stood looking down on her—on the white face, the lovely sorrowful eyes—the lips whose proud curves were tremulous now, with a sad and wistful pleading that dared not break into speech.

"I do forgive you," she said. "I judged you too harshly. But the memory of my indebtedness was rankling in my mind. There was something shameful to me in the idea of that borrowed money——"

"For God's sake don't speak of that!" he cried passionately. "Why need it trouble *you*?" He knew well it had not troubled his debtor.

"You were very generous," she said. "But I looked at your actions in a way—that—that you

could never understand. It would be no use to go back, or explain—now."

"When I leave you," he said, "I hope you will think that still. It will be some comfort."

There was a moment of dead silence. He was trying to nerve himself to say two words—those two words hardest and saddest of all that human hearts can wring from human lips. And she knew it, and thought with poignant regret of the folly and pride which had spoilt his life—as it would also spoil her own.

"If you despised me or hated me," he went on, after that brief, painful silence, "it would only be what I deserve. I see it now—I saw it when it was too late. I had no right to act as I did, and you had every right to resent it."

"Need we allude to that again?" she said gently. "I said I forgave it all, and I meant it."

"Then there is nothing more to say except—'Good-bye.'"

She held out her hand in silence. He took it, and bent his head, and she felt his lips, cold as the hand itself, rest there for a second's space. Then it fell, inert and lifeless, on the black gown, and lay there as if carved in stone.

He walked unsteadily away, seeing nothing before or around him but blank darkness. The distance to the door was as an endless journey to which the stormy throbs of his heart seemed beating a funeral march.

Ere he closed the door he looked back. She was sitting there white and still, the firelight flashing as

if in mockery on the diamonds of her betrothal ring.

"Good-bye, Kate," he said again. "May God bless you!"

He saw her lips part, but no sound came. Then the door closed, and she fell with a shudder against the crimson cushions.

. . . . . .

Mrs. Lafaye alluded very slightly to Tom Rivers's departure when she called next day.

Her "dear little romance" had shown a fiendish obstinacy in opposing her well-meant efforts, and everything had gone wrong with it. She could not blame Tom for his resolution, and she could not ask Kate to commit the meanness of breaking off her engagement, at least until Sir Wilfred was well and strong again. The change in the girl distressed her greatly, all the more so on account of her proud silence as to its real cause.

Biddy had let out that Tom Rivers had made a farewell call, and the astute little woman had no doubt in her own mind that some explanation had taken place between them, but of its nature she was completely ignorant. She could only watch the pale face, with its look of haggard misery, and note how every day the beautiful figure grew more frail and thin, and plead with Kate to be careful of herself. But the girl did not care about or heed the change. It mattered little enough now whether she looked ill or well. The first few weeks following Tom's absence were filled with self-torture. She went about her usual occupations, but to herself it seemed as if she lived and moved in a dream. Everything

about her seemed unreal except the suffering from which she could not escape, except that look as Tom's cold lips had touched her hand, except his last low, broken words.

"I never thought it would mean this," she said to her aching heart. "If I had——"

She could not quite finish that sentence, could not bring herself to acknowledge what change in her own actions the recognition of this suffering might have brought. Her only desire was to be alone. Even Mrs. Lafaye jarred upon her, and the hours she was compelled to spend with Sir Wilfred were the penance of a self-achieved purgatory.

That interesting invalid was now convalescent. The fracture had happily shown a disposition towards reunion with surrounding joints and tendons; and though he would suffer from lameness for a considerable period, the graver symptoms had entirely passed away.

When he was allowed down to the drawing-room and saw Kate there, he was struck for the first time by the change in her.

Her pallor and thinness, the dark shadows under her eyes, the strange listlessness of her movements—all that had escaped his notice so long now seemed to flash sharply and suddenly upon him. He lay on the couch and gazed at her, and pondered wearily on the cause of this alteration. Was it anxiety for himself? The thought was pleasing to his vanity, but not compatible with the coldness of her manner, or the memory of her words when she had promised to marry him.

He asked Cornelius if he had noticed the alteration in his daughter. That cheerful individual admitted that he had observed she was paler and quieter than seemed natural, but airily hinted that love and anxiety were no doubt at the bottom of it. She would be all right once the wedding-day was fixed.

A few weeks back Sir Wilfred might have believed this, but if his illness had done no other good, it had at least sharpened his drink-soddened intellect, and he was fully capable now of reflection and judgment.

He said nothing to Kate, but for hours and hours together he brooded over the subject and wondered dismally whether he should ever see the old light in her eyes, the old proud brilliant smile on her lovely lips, the grace and *verve* and vitality in her every movement that had so attracted his errant fancy.

This quiet, sad-faced girl, whose eyes haunted him like a perpetual reproach, had nothing in common with that brilliant Irish beauty at Croft, who had made all the women envious and the men admiring.

On the second afternoon that he came downstairs Mrs. Lafaye dropped in and brought Colonel Lawrence with her.

Kate had not yet seen him. The first glance at the quiet impressive face, bronzed with exposure to all seasons and all weather, and bearing marks of thought and care even in its new radiance of contentment, attracted her greatly.

"He looks so severe, and yet so gentle," she thought, and she wondered no longer that Annette Lafaye had found such a combination irresistible.

They sat by the fire and talked to each other while Mrs. Lafaye entertained Sir Wilfred. Kate could not clearly remember all he said, but the impression of comfort and sympathy that his words left behind was strangely strong and reassuring.

She reflected on it afterwards and told herself she wondered no longer at women who said they could only love a man who could "take care" of them. She felt Colonel Lawrence was just such a man—reliable, honest, brave, and full of that tenderness and reverence for women which is at once so rare and so attractive.

Meanwhile, Sir Wilfred had allowed his anxiety respecting Kate to counterbalance his animosity towards Mrs. Lafaye, and taken her into his confidence respecting it.

The little American listened with quite flattering attention to his observations. When he had finished she said in that abrupt, to-the-point manner which he so disliked, "Well, I'm glad some one has noticed the girl is killing herself as fast as she can."

"Killing herself," faltered Sir Wilfred.

"Exactly so. It may be very fine and very noble to be self-sacrificing, but I can't help thinking it's not healthy. If Nature had intended it, she'd have given us a different physique—iron and steel, instead of flesh and blood. That's about what it needs as a background."

"What do you mean?" faltered Sir Wilfred. "Ain't she happy, and—and all that?"

"What a comprehensive question. I shall ask

you another by way of answer. Does she look—happy?"

"No, I can't say she does, she's terribly altered. . . . 'Pon my honour I feel awfully distressed about it—awfully. I wish to Heaven I could do something for her," he added gloomily.

"You have heard of homœopathy, I surmise?" remarked Mrs. Lafaye. "It's a theory of medicine with one great principle—'Like cures like.'"

"Yes?" he said, rather stupidly. "Do you mean she ought to try it? Shall I tell her father?"

"No, I wouldn't do that," she answered dryly. "I only meant to suggest you might cure her yourself, if you wished."

"I!" His little sallow face flushed and his eyes looked eagerly at his adviser. "What could I do? I'll be only too happy—too awfully willing—don't yer know."

"Will you?" said Mrs. Lafaye. "Then I'll give you the prescription. The girl has made a great sacrifice for you. It's been very noble, and she'll carry it through if she dies for it. . . . But she will die, I'm afraid—at least she looks terribly like it. Now, if you, on your side, would make a sacrifice for her——"

He turned very white. "Don't ask me to give her up," he cried weakly. "I can't do it. . . . I can't indeed. I'd sooner cut my throat."

"Very well," said Mrs. Lafaye, rising. "There's no more to be said. Only it's her throat that will feel the knife—not yours."

She went over to the fireplace and began a con-

versation with the others, indulging in her usual badinage and airy nonsense, though all the time her heart ached as she noted Kate's pallor, and the shadows round her eyes, and the listless smile that had used to be so bright and gracious.

"Colonel Lawrence has been telling me all about New York and Washington," said Kate at last. "He has quite fired me with ambition to prove my own country has equal advantages."

"If you could only take him to Croft," said Mrs. Lafaye, "or get Lady Westmoreland to escort him to a Primrose League meeting, he would be converted to your opinion straight off."

"Are either of these agencies to such conversion as hopeless as they are powerful?" asked the Colonel. "Annette seems to convey as much."

"Oh, no," said Kate. "They are feasible enough, but I doubt their efficacy."

"It is a national virtue of ours to adore our country and all its institutions," said Mrs. Lafaye. "And we never find them so adorable as when we've left them behind us, or are aspersing the habits and manners and institutions of another country."

"I have not aspersed anything here," said the Colonel, regarding her with his grave smile. "I am too grateful."

The quick glance of her uplifted eyes told him she understood, and the quick stab of pain at Kate's heart told her how much she had missed—how far she was from any possibility of such happiness as seemed the very breath and life of these united lovers.

Some wise person has observed that we never form such a just appreciation of our own unhappiness as when contemplating the happiness of others. Kate felt the wisdom of the observation at that moment.

Tea was brought in and they lingered a little longer, chatting together. When at last they took leave, Sir Wilfred detained Mrs. Lafaye a moment while Kate and Colonel Lawrence moved to the door.

"I want you to tell me something," he whispered. "Is she fretting only because of her engagement, or is there some one else?"

"There is some one else," said Mrs. Lafaye quietly. "You might have seen that long ago."

"I suppose it is Tom Rivers, d—— him," muttered the little baronet wrathfully. "Where is he now?"

"He is in America," said Mrs. Lafaye. "Practising that homœopathic cure I recommended to you."

Sir Wilfred dropped her hand and turned abruptly away. From that moment he hated her almost as bitterly as he hated Tom Rivers.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL.

WHEN a perfectly selfish person begins to reflect on his selfishness, the result is a sort of moral earthquake to all previous rules and motives of life.

Sir Wilfred lay on that couch and worked himself into a perfect frenzy in his efforts to fathom the depths of Kate's suspected attachment to his rival, and the uselessness of expecting more than mere toleration for himself.

He had always felt himself devoid of all attraction for her, and he knew now that bare duty alone compelled her to keep on the engagement. At one moment he felt a savage gladness in the idea of Tom Rivers's banishment; at another he reflected gloomily on its uselessness to affect her regard for himself.

She was not a weak woman, not one to be flattered, or cajoled, or bribed. He had no physical influence over her, and no palpable grasp of her mind or inclinations. Whatever he had hoped for when he took her reluctant consent as acceptance, he hoped for no longer. He could not disguise from himself the terrible change that had taken place in her appearance, he could not but ask himself what ghost of happiness he could expect to find in the martyrdom that marriage foreshadowed to both.

His agitation made him reckless; he began to see at last that there might be a deeper depth to his present unhappiness in that future which he had painted to himself in blissful colours.

Mrs. Lafaye's plain speaking had been a great shock to him. He had some grain of good feeling in his nature. He felt a thrill of horror as those words echoed again and again in his ears—"It is her throat that will feel the knife."

"She hates me and no wonder," he thought miserably. "I oughtn't to expect her to marry me. . . I see it now. But yet it's so beastly hard to give her up."

He tossed and turned in feverish impatience on that couch, cursing his fate and himself, and in such violent perturbation of mind that it was not likely to benefit his physical condition.

He knew what he ought to do—what sooner or later he must do; and yet, it was so terribly hard to do it. In all his life he had never made a sacrifice of personal comfort or convenience, and this meant so much more. It meant giving up to another the happiness he had coveted for himself. It meant—everything.

In the storm and whirl of his thoughts Kate entered to ask him if he needed anything or would like the nurse to sit with him for an hour. "I am tired and going to my room," she added.

"Tired of me, I suppose," said the invalid sulkily. "You can talk and laugh and be agreeable enough to everybody else, it seems."

She looked at him in quiet surprise. "Surely you

do not object to my talking to my visitors," she said. "It would be rather strange if I did not."

Then a sudden remorse seized him. Involuntarily he held out his hand. "Kate," he said huskily, "you've been awfully good and patient all this time. I don't deserve it. I'm a—a selfish little beast I know, but don't you fancy I've been blind. Won't you—won't you take my hand."

She came nearer, and put out her cold, listless fingers. The damp, hot clasp that seized them sent a shudder of physical horror through her veins. He recognised that and gave her instant release. "How you hate me," he said. "Oh, don't attempt to deny it. Your looks say it if your lips don't. Will you—will you sit down there a moment? I've something to say to you."

He indicated the chair that Mrs. Lafaye had occupied, and somewhat reluctantly she took it. "I know," he began, "you think me an awful fool, and —and all that, and I suppose you're right. I've never done anything to be proud of except when I fell in love with you . . . but fool as I am, Kate, I can't see the—the change in you, and not speak. It's a hard thing to care for a girl as I care for you, and know all the time she hates you and wishes you dead. Oh! don't speak. You've been very kind and attentive—even my mother said so, and she's not easy to please—but it was all duty, it wasn't because you cared a rap for me. I see it now. I mightn't have done so but for this illness . . . it's given me plenty of time to think, at all events, and to—to look about me."

He was silent for a moment, gulping down an emotion that threatened to overcome his magnanimous resolutions.

Kate sat there perfectly still, her hands folded on her lap, her eyes downcast, a strange feeling of shame and misery oppressing her.

"Things were bad enough before," he went on presently. "But at least I thought you were heart free. Now I know you're not even that. I may be a bad lot—Kate—and a selfish devil into the bargain, but . . . 'pon my honour, I'm not bad enough or selfish enough to force you to marry me. I love you too well to make you unhappy, and you'd never be anything but that I see it all now. Oh, don't speak, I've made up my mind. Yes, I'll go back to Croft, and you shall be free and everything just as it was before— that visit."

She lifted her eyes then. Nothing could disguise their glad relief. Not even the tears that sprang into their depths, and were answered by the tears of weakness in his own

"May God bless you, Wilfred," she faltered. "You are very generous. I don't deserve it. I've acted so badly. If you only knew how I despise myself."

"There's no need," he said. "I should have taken your first answer, Kate . . . . But there's one thing more—your father? You must let me break this to him, for—I don't mind telling you—he's sure to cut up rough about it. However, I think I can square him, and then—then you'll try and be good friends with me, Kate. I don't like to think I'll lose you altogether. You could have made a better fellow of

me if any one could. But, that's not to be . . . After all, it's a caddish thing for a man to drag a girl into misery in order to please himself."

She could not answer. The revulsion of feeling was too great—the relief too wonderful. The full strain of all she had so long borne had never been so fully realised as at this moment, when it was at last relaxed.

She rose and stood by the couch, her face very pale, her eyes shining softly through a mist of tears. "What has made you say this, Wilfred?" she asked. "Nothing I have done or said, I hope."

"No," he answered readily. "You've been an angel of patience and gentleness all this time. I told you it was because I've been thinking the matter over, because I know there's some one else. I'm not going to say I'm pleased. I—I hate the fellow—but if he's the only one to make you happy, why—well, he'd better try. You sent him away for my sake, Kate, I'm sure of that. I'll do my best to bring him back, for yours."

"No," she said. "Leave him to himself. I can trust him. He will come back—some day."

Sir Wilfred breathed a sigh of relief that seemed to say hope was not yet dead within him: perhaps he thought accident might yet favour him and that Tom Rivers would not return. He reckoned without his host in the person of Mrs. Lafaye.

The arrival of Cornelius O'Brien interrupted this scene, and Kate gladly escaped to her own room, leaving Sir Wilfred to make the necessary explanations.

The little Baronet had grown somewhat tired of the perpetual claims on his purse made by his prospective father-in-law. As he entered the room now, faultlessly dressed, and with that jaunty air and self-satisfied smile that spoke of things going well with him, Sir Wilfred regarded him with gloomy disapprobation.

"Going to the club?" he asked.

"Why, yes, my dear boy. I think I shall drop in there," said O'Brien genially, as if the idea had only just presented itself to him. "I hope you won't be lonely for an hour or two. But no doubt Kate will soon be down to read and chat with you."

"Have you noticed how ill she looks?" asked Sir Wilfred shortly.

"Ill—oh, nothing at all. Only a little paleness and languor. Effects of anxiety on your behalf and confinement indoors. Nothing to be alarmed at, my dear boy . . . nothing."

"I'm not only alarmed, I'm seriously upset about it," said Sir Wilfred. "I don't want the girl to kill herself for my sake. She's much too good to be sacrificed for such a pair as we are, O'Brien."

It was not complimentary, but Cornelius threw off the reproach as lightly as if he had not remarked it.

"Sacrifice . . . who talks of sacrifice," he said, drawing on his delicate tan-coloured gloves with languid grace. "She's a very fortunate girl, and I'm sure, will be a happy one. I confess I don't see any sacrifice in that."

"You know as well as I do," said Sir Wilfred gloomily, "that the girl always hated me. She don't

want to marry me, that's the truth, and I'm not cad enough to force her to do it. There!"

Cornelius looked disturbed. "Do you mean to say that you want to break off the match, now!" he asked wrathfully. "It is unpardonable, ungentlemanly. I—I can't permit it."

"You're not the chief person concerned," said Sir Wilfred insolently. "If she agrees, I don't see what you've got to say in the matter."

"Then, sir, allow me to tell you I've a very great deal to say in the matter. You can't trifle with the honour of an Irish gentleman—let me tell you that. Nothing discreditable has ever been said of my daughter, or of me, and——"

"Oh, come now, draw it mild," interrupted the little Baronet. "Kate I allow is immaculate but you . . . Well, that is a joke don't you know? Your sentiments may be honourable enough but what about your actions, eh—O'Brien?"

"Sir," answered the Irishman loftily. "The man who questions them has to answer to me for his audacity."

"Well, I'm not in exactly fighting trim yet," said Sir Wilfred. "But when I am—dashed, if I don't take you at your word. You've no right to try and sell that lovely girl to—to any fellow who can bid high enough for her . . . I confess I did bid, but I'm not going to pay! That's the straight tip—take it or leave it. She's a million times too good for me, and I'm not going to let her be sacrificed as I said before."

"Curse your impudence," thought Cornelius, glancing furiously at the prostrate little figure.

"I—I really don't understand you, sir," he said aloud. "Do you wish to break off this engagement. Have you told my daughter so?"

"I have," said Sir Wilfred briefly.

"And after trifling with her feelings all this time——"

"Oh now—stow all that, O'Brien. There's been no trifling on my side—you know that well enough. The only part of the transaction that deserves to be called by that name is your part, the little 'obligations,' etc . . . . you know."

Cornelius reddened. He began to think the little Baronet was not quite such a fool after all.

"They shall be repaid," he said loftily. "Everyone of them. You need have no uneasiness on that score."

"Of course not. I never had," said Sir Wilfred. "You'll have another rich son-in-law to borrow from. I'm glad of that for Kate's sake—not for his."

"What do you mean," demanded O'Brien. "Who—what other?"

"Kate will tell you," said the little Baronet. "You'll have no need to find fault with her choice, unless a little is as indispensable as wealth."

"I'm quite in the dark as to what all this means," answered Cornelius. "You and Kate seem to have come to an understanding without consulting me in any way."

"Well," observed Sir Wilfred. "You're rather fond of shelving responsibilities so you oughtn't to complain. I've told you I've released Kate from her

engagement because I can plainly see she's very unhappy, and because I know she cares for some other fellow."

"But who is he?" asked O'Brien quickly. "It's all very fine for you to talk like this, but I've some right to be consulted."

"Well you can ask Kate about it," said Sir Wilfred gloomily. "Though I should have thought you'd have been clever enough to see how the cat jumped long ago."

Apparently Cornelius did not consider that this feline feat, whether metaphorical or not, was worthy of remark for he turned to leave the room. Sir Wilfred called out after him not to bother Kate as she was ill and tired, but he vouchsafed no answer. However, he did not disturb his daughter—that could wait—he told himself. He simply called a hansom and had himself driven to the Langham Hotel and requested to see Mrs. Lafaye.

The pretty American received him in her private sitting-room, wondering not a little what could have brought him there at so unusual an hour for callers.

"What's wrong?" she asked quickly as she looked into his troubled face. He sat down by the table and began to pour out his grievances with an injured air. She watched him and listened to him, recognising as she had often done the selfishness of his character and the onesidedness of his opinions. But the news startled her. That Sir Wilfred should have so suddenly and unexpectedly cut the Gordian Knot of difficulty seemed almost incredible.

"Are you sure you've made no mistake?" she

asked. "Given Kate up—broken off the engagement? Why, when I was there this afternoon he was as keen on it as ever."

"Well, I only know what I had from his own lips," said O'Brien. "Of course it's all Kate's fault. She's offended him, or slighted him, or. . . ."

"Stop." said Mrs. Lafaye sharply. "You know as well as I do that the girl never cared about him. Have you been blind to the change in her. She looks perfectly broken down and miserable. She's just been killing herself to please you and to keep her word. I've a higher opinion of Sir Wilfred than I ever thought possible if he's really acted as you say."

"I think he's behaved in a most dishonourable manner," said Cornelius wrathfully. "Within a month or two of actual marriage to break off the match like this, and set every one talking about it."

"Let them talk," said Mrs. Lafaye contemptuously. "We are all a great deal too frightened of what people say. Just as if it really mattered. Would one of these gossipers or scandal-mongers hold out a hand to save us from any misery or any trouble? Would they care for our heart-breaks, or heart-aches even if we acted as they decide we ought to act; as they are so ready to affirm they would act in our place? I've no patience with little mindedness. And I don't see what you've to complain of," she added. "If Kate breaks off with Sir Wilfred she can make quite as good a match. Don't you know that Mr. Rivers is the favoured lover?"

"Rivers—Tom Rivers—why he was staying at

Croft! Good Heavens, I never dreamt there was anything between Kate and himself."

"Then you must have been remarkable short-sighted," said Mrs. Lafaye, with a little contemptuous gesture.

He drew a breath of relief. "She's a very lucky girl," he said. "Why, that young fellow will be a millionaire—richer than Sir Wilfred, a great deal."

"That should be a salve to your wounded honour, and enable you to treat the matter with philosophy instead of indignation," said Mrs. Lafaye.

"How did you know? Did Kate tell you?" asked Cornelius eagerly.

"Yes, to both questions."

"But where is he—the young fellow, I mean?"

"In America, at present. But no doubt he will speedily return if he hears that Kate is free."

Cornelius looked gloomy. He had been counting upon Kate's speedy marriage, and running up a very substantial edition of debts and liabilities on this foundation of hope. Would creditors wait, or would they believe in the new alliance? It seemed doubtful. "I wish," he said, "that Rivers had been more explicit, or that I had been taken into my daughter's confidence."

"I see very little use in either. What could Mr. Rivers do, when he knew she was engaged, but retire gracefully from the contest. And Kate—well, you ought to know her nature better than I do, if she has made up her mind to go through with a thing—why, she'll do it. I confess I admire her for being so reliable. But it's rather hard to force her into misery,

and I'm thankful that Sir Wilfred has seen his mistake. The girl was too good, and lovely, and lovable, to be sacrificed."

"Sacrificed," echoed O'Brien pettishly. "Why will you all persist in saying that? Kate acted of her own free will. I never forced her to accept Sir Wilfred."

"No?" questioned Mrs. Lafaye, lifting her pretty eyebrows. "But there are indirect means and ways of coercion quite as powerful as the rod and bread and water of childhood. I suppose you are resigned to the change? I ask, because I know Mr. Rivers' address."

"Do you?" he exclaimed eagerly. "Well . . . you had better let him know what's happened. Of course, I'm very disappointed and—all that, but what can I do?"

"Nothing, I should say," observed Mrs. Lafaye dryly. "Except give the girl a chance at last to be happy. She needs it. And now, I must really ask you to excuse me. The dinner bell rang quite five minutes ago."

Cornelius rose with some alacrity. He was not at all dissatisfied with what had happened, though still completely ignorant that he had once entertained "an angel unawares" in the person of a bailiff. He knew very little about Tom Rivers, except that he was heir to the famous brewery, but that was enough, at present.

He left Mrs. Lafaye's presence with a semblance of regret as to the turn affairs had taken, with a chastened sorrow that Kate should have been so

fickle, and he himself kept so completely in the dark. But he did not deceive the little widow in the very least. She only retailed the whole affair merrily to Colonel Lawrence, after dinner, and advised him to lose no time in writing to Tom to acquaint him with what had occurred.

The Colonel listened silently, then a curious twinkle of satisfaction came into his grave deep eyes. "I conclude I'll cable," he said.

. . . . .

What Tom Rivers' feelings were when he received that cable it is not given to his historian to know.

His only answer was to return to England by the very next steamer, thereby losing a valuable opportunity of studying the social and political aspect of a great Republic, and the marvels to be achieved in a free country by even a hundred years of independent life. It was a great deal to sacrifice, but he was young and foolish, and time seemed all too long till he could see once more the sweet pale face of his Irish love, till he could hear from her own lips the assurance he dared hardly believe, that after all their quarrels, their pride, their misunderstandings and separation, he was, and he alone had been, the "man in possession" of that wayward heart.

. . . . . .

What of Sir Wilfred? He recovered slowly but surely, and went out to New York, and was married to a lovely American girl, as a fitting punishment for his harsh strictures on the charming womanhood of that country.

Lady Jocelyn did not forgive Kate for her bad

treatment of her boy, a circumstance which did not materially affect the happiness or content of that young lady.

Cornelius O'Brien decided to live abroad after his daughter's marriage, and managed to do so very pleasantly and successfully, with the help of an "occasional loan" from his son-in-law, which—like Tom Smith's fifty pounds—passed gracefully and gradually into the limbo of forgotten debts.

When Mrs. Lafaye returned to New York, as Mrs. Mark Elmore Lawrence, she took Biddy with her, declaring that she was, without exception, the most "original domestic she had ever come across."

The "original," to prove herself worthy of her character, married a sailor on board the vessel that took her out, and so never entered her new mistress's service at all.

And Kate?—Kate is so happy, so lovely, so entirely changed from the harassed, care-worn girl of that fateful Christmas Eve, that her husband, proud and adoring as he is, and a little inclined sometimes to be jealous of the admiration she excites, cannot fail to be content with the assurance she gives him that she owes the change entirely to himself, and has long ceased to resent the fact that Tom Smith was as worthy to be loved as Tom Rivers.

THE END.

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